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The AdjunctPod

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The AdjunctPod

Ross Bullen*

I felt the neural note buzz in my forehead, but I didn't mindscan the message right away. I was too exhausted to deal with any new notifications from my EduClients. I was at the tail end of a 72-hour Positive Reinforcement Retreat. My skull was throbbing after mindscanning 500 EduClient Satisfaction Reports on corporate leadership strategies in *Moby-Dick*. I'd given out nothing but A-plusses—*The EduClient is always right!*—and I needed to risk taking an unscheduled break. I curled up on my bunk on the far side of the AdjunctPod and tried to trick myself into sleep.

Lying on my mattress I could hear Randy the Medievalist dragging his replica Viking battle axe out from under his bed. This was followed by the unmistakable sound of the axe's blade pressed against a spinning whetstone. There was something comforting about the stone's whir and the gritty friction of the grinding. Randy must

have been called up to teach a class. He used the axe as a teaching aid, showing his EduClients how to authentically dismember an Anglo Saxon peasant. I was happy for him. He had been stuck in the AdjunctPod for the past five months, and the isolation was starting to get to him. I was worried that the AdjunctSect's Productivity Dean had placed him on the premature retirement list. Randy had been acting weird, even for a Medievalist. Talking to himself, reformatting his C.V. in Old Norse syllabic. I told myself that if I found him scrawling runes on the bathroom wall again I'd put in for a transfer to a different AdjunctSect.

I was in a deep sleep when I felt the Time Management Pulse. It was like someone slammed my face against the AdjunctPod's concrete wall. The Productivity Dean must have noticed that I had stopped mindscanning my ESRs. I rubbed my eyes to help shake the sting of the wake-up call. On the far side of the AdjunctPod I could see that Randy was doing deep leg lunges and

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chanting something about Odin. I rolled over and tugged my right earlobe to activate my mindscanner. The earlier message scrolled through my retinal reader.

To: undisclosed recipients

From: MLA Executive Committee

Subject: Believe it or not, there will be a TENURE-TRACK JOB!!! at this year's MLA Convention in Las Vegas!

It had been years since I'd received a neural note from the Modern League of Adjuncts. It was hard to know what to make of the subject. The last of the tenured professors had been retired over fifty years ago. It was an obsolete job, like being a chimney sweep. I sat up in my bunk and kept reading.

Greetings Loyal MLA Members!

We know it has been a while since you have heard from us, and for that we are truly sorry. We also know that it was disappointing to many—dare we say all!—of you that the last few MLA Conventions have been cancelled. We know all about the rumors and, without getting too specific, we'd like to tell you to put your minds at ease! As long as there are hard-working Adjuncts out there, the MLA will be just fine. In fact, we think we can safely say that, since the warlord raids on federal grant servers seem to have subsided, we are doing better than ever.

And to show you just how great the MLA is doing, we want to invite you to our Convention in the warlord-extirpated Las Vegas Free State!

But enough about us. We are quite sure that the subject line of this message caught your attention! Many of you are probably thinking that we are joking around. Well, heretics, you are wrong, wrong, wrong! The job is very real, and best of all—are you ready for this!—it's at HARVARD! Okay, to be clear, it is at Harvard's new satellite satellite campus on the Moon, but a job is a job, and if there aren't any jobs left on Earth, where else do you expect to find one? The Moon is not so bad. The Moon is actually pretty swanky compared to some of the AdjunctPods you are living in. In a couple of years people will be moaning about the lack of jobs on the Moon as they pack up and move to Mars. So this is a great opportunity to be a cutting-edge early adopter!

I didn't really know how bad things were on Earth. At 38, I was the youngest person in my AdjunctPod by a couple of decades. The UniPod was the only kind of school I had ever known. When I was getting my degree in the Literature of Innovation, my professors were all Adjuncts, uploaded into our LearningPods for a few hours at a time and then downloaded to their AdjunctPods for storage, grading, and professional development through hard labor. We didn't

really know them, but they seemed happy enough—probably, we reasoned, because they knew how innovative they were being.

When I was 22 I wanted to be chosen for Corporate Leadership Stream. When I received the neural note informing me that I'd be in EduClient Satisfaction instead, I was crushed. My father had been a Corporate Leader all his life, but he still was willing to comfort me. He showed me a videoscan of the Last Tenured Professor reading his confession before the Great Efficiency Committee, just a few hours before his retirement. I could see the Professor sweating as he denounced the decadence of his former profession. Cushy salaries, office spaces, pensions—he admitted all of these selfish indulgences were holding the UniPod back from being as efficient as it should be. Before he was dragged out of the room for his retirement party, he spoke about the future. How an endless supply of Adjuncts would bring the UniPod into a new century. How AdjunctPods, AdjunctSects, and Productivity Deans would make the most out of the bad situation he had helped to create. How all of this would be in the best interests of EduClients and Corporate Leaders. How the Great Efficiency Committee was wise and interdisciplinary in its judgments.

My father paused the videoscan just as the Professor was being hauled away by the Punishment Provosts.

“You know, son,” he said, “That man was evil. He was not a team player. But he was also right about the future. The world he described is the one we live in now.”

“I know,” I said.

“Now look, I understand that you were hoping to be a Corporate Leader. But it's not for everybody, and that's a hard pill to swallow. There's nothing wrong with EduClient Satisfaction, though! Being an Adjunct, living in an AdjunctPod. . . . That's the bright future the Great Efficiency Committee wanted to innovate all those years ago. And now it's happened!”

I could recall the look on my father's face as he spoke to me. A slight wince, like he'd just found a splinter under his thumbnail. Sitting on my mattress in the AdjunctPod, I tried, unsuccessfully, to remember the last time I received a neural note from him.

I turned my attention back to the MLA's message and scanned my way through the job ad.

Harvard University is seeking a Tenure-Track Assistant Professor in the Literature of Innovation to lead Corporate Leadership Hangouts at our new Lunar City satellite campus. The successful applicant will organize Hangouts in Business Literature, Synergy Studies, American Literature from

1990 to Dissolution, Basic Moon Rover Repair, and Digital Cyberhumanities. The successful applicant will also need to arrange his or her own transportation to the Moon. Accommodation in Lunar City's trendy Innovation/Mineral Extraction district and a daily ration of NutritionPellets+ will be provided in lieu of pension, benefits, sabbatical, professional development funds, and salary. The successful applicant will be permitted to leave out a tip jar at the end of each semester. To apply, please mindscan a cover letter, C.V., statement of Corporate Hangout philosophy, statement of commitment to innovation, statement of unyielding fealty and obedience to Harvard and the Great Efficiency Committee, evidence of zero gravity training, and two dozen letters of recommendation to the following neural notification box...

What luck! I was the only person in my AdjunctPod with a Ph.D. in the Literature of Innovation. Everybody else, like Randy, held old-fashioned degrees in “comparative literature” or “cultural studies” or “post-Derridean semiotics” or some other ancient field. Not me. I was in the teaching game for all the right reasons. I loved innovation, flexibility, and the creative economy. I loved scanning my way through old books like *Moby-Dick* or *The Great Gatsby* to discover their real, business-positive meanings, the practical and timeless lessons that they could impart to our next generation of Corporate Leaders. And so what if my

EduClients didn't bother to read any of this stuff? They paid for their A-plusses and it was my job to make sure they got what they wanted. I was making a productive contribution to the global economy, without costing it a dime.

I wondered how many other applicants there would be. The numbers were fuzzy, but I knew there were hundreds of thousands of Adjuncts in my AdjunctSect's larger Learning Network, and I assumed there were other networks out there somewhere, possibly even on the surface in some of the Free States. But I figured I had a real shot. By the time I got my Ph.D. from StudyWell Services University, most people had abandoned EduClient Satisfaction. Tenure was long gone, rumors about life in the AdjunctPods were starting to spread. When people were selected for EduClient Satisfaction Stream, like I was, they usually chose to do hard labor instead. I was probably one of the only 38-year-olds in the world with a Ph.D. in *anything*, let alone the very thing called for in the first tenure track job ad in half a century. But everybody in my AdjunctPod would apply anyway. Every passed-over septuagenarian with a stale Ph.D. in Shakespeare or Joyce or Beowulf would see this as their last, best opportunity for something better.

I heard the door to the AdjunctPod slam shut. I looked up and saw Randy the Medievalist leaning against it, holding his sharp-

ened battle axe and the first draft of a cover letter. He was a sixty-six-year-old man with a degree in a dead language. There was nothing innovative about him. I saw the axe blade glimmer as it caught the low fluorescent light of the AdjunctPod's bulb.

The job flickered like a battered jewel, and vanished.