

Systems & Services
(or, The Content Provider)

A man is standing, relaxed—hands folded behind his back—contemplating a cherry tree. The tree is in bloom, fragrant pink blossoms buzzing with honeybees dizzy on nectar.

First noticed from the second-floor bathroom window, the man is seen from behind, his stance fully at ease, as if in reverie.

“John, someone is standing in the back yard.”

“What? Who?”

“I don’t know. You don’t have a guest over?”

“No.”

John pressed the mute button on the remote control and got up to see what his wife was talking about. He came into the bathroom and stood next to her at the window.

“What the hell...”

“You don’t know him?”

“Not a clue.”

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“May I help you?”

The man, still contemplating the cherry tree, turned calmly as if he were the estate

manager and had just dropped by to check on his gardener's progress. Because John's first question was *May I help you*, the man inferred that he was a weakling.

"*Sakuragari*," the man said.

"Excuse me?"

"*Sakuragari*. Japanese. It means cherry blossoms."

"Oh." John failed to hide his confusion.

"I'm sorry," the man said, "Lucien Avocet," then extended his hand, which John reached for hesitantly. Avocet sensed his hesitation and noncommittal grip, another sign of a chump, he concluded. He reached into his pocket and offered his business card. John thanked him, somewhat relieved because the card spelled out the name he didn't catch on first hearing. The card was plain, white and simply offered name, title and telephone number.

"Systems & Services," John said. "What types of systems and services, may I ask?"

Avocet noted the *may I ask*, and filed another datum in his inventory: schmuck.

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John's wife, who had been observing from the bathroom window, saw the handshake and the proffered business card and concluded that the man was selling something, although trespassing onto private property was a foolhardy way of making cold calls. Either the man was very dense or very lucky not to have been shot by people less reasonable than she and her husband.

First she thought she'd let her husband deal with a pesky door-to-door salesman, but on further observation she saw that the man didn't look like a typical sales rep. For one, he was dressed impeccably. Even from the second-floor window she could tell that his navy blazer was tailored and not off the rack. Seeing the drape of his trousers she guessed high-end wool, not salesman's polyester. Shirt: her vantage point was too far to be sure but it looked like designer quality. And his hair, expensively coiffed, without a doubt. High cheekbones and a rich tan made him look like a GQ model. She'd have to get a closer look.

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"Melissa, this is Lucien, Lucien, my wife Melissa."

Avocet corrected John's pronunciation, "Loo-shin, not Lucy-in," and took her extended hand. Kissing it might be over the top, he thought, so instead, he stepped close and gave her a debonair left-right cheek-to-cheek brush.

"Lucien's just back from Japan, that's why he was checking our cherry tree."

"Yes, terribly sorry," Lucien said. (What accent was that? Not quite Italian or Spanish, certainly not French, more like a vaguely continental composite.) "I was driving by, saw the tree and immediately thought of Japan. One of the companies in my consortium is in a joint venture with a French parfumerie to capture a new blend of rare cherry blossom essence. Your tree is so lovely I wanted a closer look to see if I could determine its provenance. I really should have asked your permission but I thought I'd be only a moment, then on my way. Please accept my apologies."

“No need to apologize,” John said, “we’re just glad you’re not a Jehovah’s Witness!” He nailed a loud laugh onto his remark so everyone would know he was kidding.

“Weedniz?” Avocet asked.

“Oh, don’t mind him,” Melissa said, “John’s sense of humour is an acquired taste.” She dangled hanging quote marks—two curved forefingers of each hand—around the word “humour.”

Avocet gave her a quizzical look then mirrored her gesture, holding up his forefingers, which made them both laugh. After a bit of small talk—what brings him to Bixford, how was Japan, what other businesses does his consortium handle—Melissa said “How rude of me! Would you care for something to drink? Iced tea? Water? Juice?”

“That’s very generous of you, but I barged in unannounced so I mustn’t.”

“Nonsense. It’s hot as the blazes,” John said. “C’mon in and have a beverage.”

Avocet took a quick glance at his smartphone then said, “Well, I *am* quite thirsty I must say.”

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John held the back door open as Melissa ushered Avocet through a mud room, down a hallway and into the kitchen where a docile golden retriever shambled over to sample Avocet’s scent. Damp nose to open palm satisfied the dog’s curiosity so she returned to her water bowl and lapped indecorously.

Avocet regarded the dog fondly. “Great dogs, retrievers. One of the research institutes

we're funding is seeking a cure for canine lymphoma, which afflicts retrievers at a much higher rate than most breeds. A genetic thing apparently."

Melissa looked surprised. "I didn't know that" she said, serving the drinks—an iced tea for Avocet, a lemonade for herself and a Diet Coke for John—then suggested they go sit in the solarium. Passing through the den, Avocet noted golf magazines and DVDs scattered on the coffee table.

"The Challenge at Manele" Avocet said, nodding toward the glossy cover of *Golf Getaways* magazine, "beautiful course."

"Wow, you've played the Challenge?" John asked.

"Me? No. I'm not much of a golfer I'm afraid. But one of my investment firms has worked with Donald Trump, scouting locations to develop new golf resorts. Think Hilton Head to the max."

"That's fantastic!" John enthused. "So you actually met 'The Donald'?"

"I did indeed."

"Wow. What's he like?"

"A complete ass. With a sinful amount of money."

This cracked John up. "Melissa, did you hear that? Lucien says Donald Trump is a total asshole!"

"Well of course he is."

From where he sat in the solarium Avocet could see a black Lincoln Navigator parked in front of a 3-bay garage.

"How do you like your Nav, John?"

“Awesome. A little heavy but you wanna feel safe out there.”

“They’re top-heavy. Prone to roll. If I were you I’d have a customized roll bar installed because the roof is like aluminum foil. Flip that thing and your brain is road pudding.” (Did his accent just degrade from quasi-continental to Jersey shore?)

“Really?”

Avocet glanced around. To his right he could see the corner of a giant flat-screen TV mounted on a stone wall. He nodded in that direction and said “Impressive home theatre. One of our subsidiaries is currently brokering a deal with Netflix to adapt an American version of the French hit TV series *Inspector Godard*.”

Though neither John nor Melissa had heard of the show they both said in unison, “Wow,” then tittered at the coincidence.

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OK, so the whole thing was merely to prove a point: About a year and a half before this visit, Lucien Avocet (not his real name) was working for the Town of Bixford Parks & Recreation department as a seasonal groundskeeper. It was the only job he managed to find after being “right-sized” out of his previous position as a content provider for Tex-A-Lent, an online startup he’d been with for three years until its CFO discovered that crowd-sourcing could provide most of the so-called “content” they’d been paying staff to write and—here was the closer—do so without remuneration.

Six months had passed and Dave (the name Lucien’s parents had given him) had

tapped out his unemployment insurance benefits. He managed to squeak by for another two months on his meagre savings. Then, to keep the collection agencies at bay, he applied for a job he saw in the classified ads for a seasonal (“may lead to permanent”) groundskeeper for the Town of Bixford Parks & Recreation department. He was amazed when he was called for an interview. Two weeks later he was more amazed when he was offered the job since one of the hiring criteria was that he had to pass a drug screen test. He’d known better than to ask his interviewer why it was so vital that a lawn cutter and trash collector never smoke the occasional joint. Maybe Doug McTeague, the guy who had the final say on whom to hire—and who, as it turned out, himself smoked the occasional doobie (the occasion being 3:30 daily out on the bench behind the equipment barn)—recognized that Dave was at least sharp enough *not* to ask why it was so vital that a lawn cutter and trash collector never smoke the occasional joint.

The point being, nearly a year and a half ago, Dave was sent out on tree irrigation duty. This involved driving a truck outfitted with a water tank, a long industrial-gauge hose with a tapered steel “injector” that was stomped into the wood-chip mulch piled at the base of young Kentucky coffee trees planted a year earlier along the right-of-ways between homeowners’ front yards and the town’s curbed streets.

When Dave parked the service truck in front of 138 Copper Beech the owner came out to see what he was up to. No surprise there, Dave was used to it. Homeowners in this neighbourhood took great pride in their lawns, yards, gardens and topiary. They wanted to make certain the Town always hewed to the letter of the law: no loud machinery before 7 a.m. or after 8 p.m., no use of banned pesticides, no dumping of trash outside the

designated landfill.

The homeowner at 138 Copper Beech gave Dave the once-over, and Dave explained what he was doing. “Deep irrigation. We inject a water-nutrient solution deep into the root ball. Works better than surface dribble.”

The guy nodded then stood around as if to make sure Dave’s story held up. Dave proceeded with the irrigation, a process that would take fifteen minutes. Every time Dave glanced at the guy, who stood vigilant on the sidewalk, the guy averted his eyes, looked in another direction as if Dave wasn’t there, and he had just come out for a nice breath of fresh air.

It had been a long day for Dave. His was the afternoon shift, meaning he worked from 2:30 till 10:00. It was now 7:45 and this was his last tree because deep irrigation was a task you didn’t do in the dark. But emptying the parks’ trash barrels after sundown was OK so he’d start his garbage run as soon as he finished watering this tree.

It had been a fiercely hot day. It was almost 8 o’clock in the evening and the temperature still hung around 84 degrees. Working this job, Dave looked forward each day to getting back home and cracking open a cold beer. To get through the rest of his shift of emptying trash barrels and picking up discarded condoms while kids hanging out and drinking in the park would shout out to him, ‘Yo garbage dude, you missed my scumbag,’ Dave promised himself today would be a 3-beer day.

The guy watching him on the sidewalk was getting on Dave’s nerves. If he wanted to say something, say it. Don’t just stand there staring, then look away every time I make eye contact. *What’s your fucking problem dickweed?* That’s what Dave was thinking but kept his

mouth shut. Instead he looked at his watch: 8 more minutes for the tree to slake its thirst.

Dave was suppressing the urge to yank the injector out of the ground and blast the guy's ridiculous pink golf shirt. Better judgment cautioned: *bad thought*. The force of the high-pressure injector could drill out the bastard's eyeballs. Trying to ignore him, Dave's gaze moved beyond and took in the guy's house: two-storey, stucco-finished, sand-coloured, Bauhaus style; four symmetrical windows, glass segmented into small rectangular panes contrasted by freshly painted black muntins, each casement a bevelled wraparound, front and sides, admitting light from at least two directions.

"That's a nice house you have, sir."

"Huh? Oh, thanks."

"Bauhaus," Dave smiled appreciatively.

"What?"

"Bauhaus," Dave repeated, and gave the thumbs-up sign.

"Oh," the guy said, "right. I'll have to get that trimmed soon."

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Dave couldn't figure the non sequitur, not at the time. Later on, when he was into his third beer at home he realized: the guy must have thought that Dave—being a tree guy—was making a comment about a tree branch, or bough, that was overhanging the left corner of the house. *Bough...house*. The guy had pegged Dave for a simpleton—long unkempt hair, bushy brown beard, baseball cap pulled low on his brow against sun glare, faded and

tattered Patti Smith T-shirt, ripped and stained jeans, unlaced dusty work-boots—the guy recognized a knuckle-dragger when he saw one.

Bough...house...me cut down!

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When John got up to go to the bathroom, Melissa asked Avocet if he'd care to "take the grand tour." He said he'd be delighted.

"I know it's probably very modest compared to what you're used to but we like our little home," she said. He agreed and said it really was quite lovely.

When they walked into the "master bedroom suite," as she called it, and stood before an open window with a sheer white curtain billowing in the breeze, Avocet felt a powerful temptation to say something he knew he shouldn't: Are you happy with John?

Excuse me?

You know what I'm asking. A guy like John...he can't possibly keep a woman like you satisfied.

How would she react? Or what if he handed her one of his business cards and said, Call me when you're ready. I offer 100% satisfaction guaranteed. You won't even have to reciprocate if you don't want to. Just lie back, spread your legs and I'll lick you till you come like Vesuvius.

But that was crazy and Dave knew it: craziness crazily trying to grab the wheel again while he was driving. He noticed their reflection in a vanity mirror, both of them standing

together, shoulders nearly touching. Through the open window he looked out to the back yard where the golden retriever slouched in the grass, lazily chewing a stick. What exactly, did he think he was doing there? Dave wondered. What if he was actually attracted to Melissa? Would he have acted differently? As it was, he felt no temptation, she wasn't his type at all. In truth, she seemed perfect for John.

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"I think I'll go with a buzz cut this time," Dave said.

"How short?"

"Five o'clock shadow-short."

Kylie steadied the scissors before making the irreversible first chop. "Buzz cut. Is that your final answer?"

"Let's do it."

And so she did.

"I don't know," she said, looking at his head, now a patchwork of hacked splotches and mismatched tufts. "I liked you with that GQ look. Very Princeton. It suited your natural arrogance."

"Kylie, you're great at cutting hair but you really need to work on your customer service skills."

"You're not my customer. You walk my dogs in exchange for haircuts."

"Yeah, well, I came here for a haircut, not to be insulted."

She had proceeded to the clipper stage, mowing the rough scissor cut down to a bristly stubble. She stepped back to assess her work. “On second thought” she said, “maybe a punk look does suit you. I mean, messing with those people the way you did, *that was punk.*”

“No harm done. And I proved my point didn’t I?”

“Which was?”

“They’re assholes.”

“You pretty much knew that the first time you went there.”

“I did. But I wanted to see just how fucked up they are.”

“You’re lucky you weren’t caught. All that nonsense about your ‘consortium of companies.’ How gullible can people be?”

“People believe what they want to believe.”

Kylie was running the clippers over the bumps and irregularities of Dave’s denuded scalp, confirming her belief that many men, if not most, should stay away from the trendy bald look. “And what do *you* believe, David?”

Dave glanced at himself in the hand mirror she held up to him.

“I believe this haircut makes me look like a profoundly disturbed individual.”

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