

ZOMG!

<Prologue>

Our belonging is no longer to something fixed, known and familiar, but to an electric and heartless creature eternally in motion.

—Michael Ignatieff, *The Needs of Strangers*.

Separated from his product, man himself produces all the details of his world with ever more increasing power, and thus finds himself ever more separated from his world.

The more his life is now his product, the more he is separated from his life.

—Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*

Leamingville is like most other cities, a social centrifuge that throws its poor on the wind to the east, box stores and car dealerships to the south, the more established gentry and corporate executives to the old north, the middle class on its conurbations to the west, and a cluster of young adults and students occupying cheap apartments in a downtown core made derelict by the vast commercial migration to mega-stores on the fringes of the city. This story concerns ten major characters and a smattering of minor ones over a two year period, leading up to the mayoral election. This Ontario city is mostly conservative in its marrow but shows a slight liberal aspect when it is fashionable or the city gets a bit tipsy.

In the west where the middle class hangs its golf shirts, on a particular street with others named after trees (Spruce Street, in this case) lives a cubicle clerk named **Paul Imago** and his wife **Molly**, a media consultant named **Lars Purcell** and his wife **Tracy**, and young **Sally** whose father works for the radio conglomerate ClarityDial.

To the north and its big yellow-brick hutches resides the current mayor of Leamingville (**Dmitri Grimm**), two professors who teach at the nearby university (Drs **Walter Knox** and **Viktor Allen**), and a corporate middle-aged maven of Leamingville's largest employer, MRI (Media Research Initiatives), **Edna Bergman**.

Among the tatters of the east end are such manual labour class workers like **Tom** and **Tobbar**. Like most workers, they are alienated from their own labour, but with no greater severity than how most consumers are also alienated from their own purchased commodities as they chase after ideal identities no object or cosmetic surgery will ultimately grant them, spend as they may.

Lodged in the downtown is the recent arrival, a thirty-something, shiftless graphic designer and all-round overwrought, “I’m too ironic for my irony”, Gen-Xish, cynical posturing man named **Tristan Frazer** who has come loaded with what he believes is a sure-win social media moneymaking scheme. Also in this core would be the buzzing social media addiction of **Gregory Bugg** and his surprising imminent redemption. All of this will take place within the span of two years.

And then we have **EXO** who seems to live only on the airwaves in a somewhat twee and nostalgic reprise of the power of radio in this age of febrile “netivity” and counterfeit social relationships.

Some of these people are already connected by marriage, work, friendship, or blood,

while still others will be introduced in roles major and minor. This is a story of media and politics and therapy writ at the scale and level of the “every town.” The facts on Leamingville can be accessed at the end of this story for those interested in such data as population, sewerage, and a modest capsule history.

Some of our episodes may be out of joint, which is to say that we are in good faith with the interruption technologies of the present, the short attention span of those suffering under the high switching costs of email notifications and always another newsfeed to follow.

Welcome to Leamingville, “The Greenspace City”

Visit us today on our website: leamingville.ca, or follow us on Blinker, EgoWall, and FeedingFriendzy

CHAPTER1

#Seth, #Palookaville, #Tristan Frazer #Leamingville
#Spectacle

HE had typed it volubly, or at least that was his impression just moments after he had clicked only for it to respond with SENT, followed by an abrupt screen shift that ejected him from message mode to the home page where the frivolity feed was espaliered with thumb-nail connections that we could only cynically call friends. Another ego casualty of mass self-communication, another barrage of blanks from a diminishing arsenal of style weapons and wit-compressed cluster bombs. Tristan, faced with the impotent inutility of the device, his use of that device, could not prod the inertia of others—even in

**Frivolity Feed /
feedingfriendzy**

**DDRG
ok Tristan, you can
go shave yr back
now #Foe-shohr!**

**WiredWeirdWeb
Is this guy
#forreal?**

**Ferd&
Bad faith written all
ova the dood**

**DDRG
ive got voyeur
needs #crybebe**

**Dassileen
laaaaaame
#boringme2shit**

**DDRG
websmurf?
#wtf????
gotta change the
channel on da web**

**WiredWeirdWeb
check it:
www.trstnfrzr.net
\pics\whoregano
\nootsot #LEGIT
thats sick dude!!!**

writing in all caps: LOOK AT ME!

What he had typed was in response to some issue or other that elicited his need to participate, to brandish or inflict his opinion upon the world with the authoritative heft and intent of the commentariat. But it was as equally frivolous and easily forgotten as anything else posted, buried within a layer of other trending topical memes and the general impaction of echoed opinions. Dumped among the usual bubble gum quality of posts and blogs, his own production was little more than another pip in the online pile.

Tristan Frazer had fought and lost the system of excorporating¹ himself from an immense industry of incorporation which sold his anti-corporate brand right back at him.

Gizmos lasting as long as slang in the revolving spectacle of economic determinism. A blackened bulb over every digital self pushing hard from inside the membrane of an electric chrysalis.

No, he thought. He would conjure his way out, and this by means of the most meta-narrative he could enclose around a world without stimulus, locked in the hypnosis of obligatory *Webschmerz*.² Everyone trusted the way the search engine sorted and spewed out the results. His effect on changing any of that with incendiary critique? The public barometer would not budge; the profit machines would still purr and grind the gears in their infinite guts. What was needed was a free creative space, a segregated soap bubble within the larger bubble. He would make the fiction, and he would appear within it.

Tristan picked up his copy of *Palookaville* by Seth (aka Gregory Gallant).³

I could do something like that, Tristan thought. And then he did.

One could picture the staccato vision of a time-lapse photographic reel, the kind that show how oranges rot quickly or flowers break free from the soil and wobble into bloom. From up the arid, flat landscape with its occasional, monotonous bulge or dip, an entire cardboard metropolis springs up... Well, not a metropolis—more of a mid-sized city, a folded wedge between other urban wedges, a spacer that resignedly inherits the provincial title and self-generates its own mythology. Up comes Leamingville, ringed with gooey, jellybean-coloured buttons that cannot be interacted with.⁴ Less a digital footprint than a flyspeck, traces of instantaneous swarm, the “flash mob populam” turning now into flash migration, from one shiny thing to another.

**Jassileen
Leamingville
sounds like a
rockin place
#Foshizzle gonna
get me some hot
action in
Leamingville
TROLLOLOLO!**

**Muggahugga21
[sponsored ad]:
feedingfriendly is
a real-time social
communication
tool where you can
post feeds or
regurgitate your
friends' feeds!**

**MuggaHugga21
[sponsored ad]:
Just hit the
Regurgifeed
button on your
dashboard to see
ReG.**

**DDRG
wotta ass clown!
#gtfo!**

¹ Z@MG!wiki: **excorporation** is a term used by popular culture theorist John Fiske. It sort of means taking a piece out of mainstream culture and doing it your way!

² Z@MG!wiki: **Webschmerz** is a made-up German word that means the web + being weary of the world!

³ Z@MG!wiki: **Seth** is a Canadian artist who is known for his work in graphic novels and other cartoony goodness!

⁴ Z@MG!wiki: Get driving directions to **Leamingville** by clicking [here](#)!

CHAPTER 2

#imagination, #pistachio, #baby, #decor

OUR crisis is common, too common: It is safe.

There was nothing offensive about the man any more than a brushed steel surface or a functional piece of moulded plastic could be.

Paul was fitted and installed in his domestic environment by unseen flat-pack employees. All around him a widescreen, high definition scene in a lurid depiction of things unworthy to take notice of, even if they moved and chattered and pinged to capture attention with the power of a weak mental magnet. Paul Imago, in the adult stage, typically winged with the diaphanous lustre of a home, a secure job, a young marriage, and adult toys, buzzed with the mildest discontent, a conspicuous absence of spice in a jar of salsa laid out for a long, dull, and excruciatingly polite party. Deathly *moyenne*, there seemed no way to go in search to reclaim what one never had in the first place: the faculty of imagination, a province now dominated and diminuendoed by website designers and the desultory spending practices of the defoliated celebrity. And more than that—which is less—in a virtual clearing wreathed by amateur PR flacks with cell phone video uploading habits. According to all clinical tests that could be done, there was nothing neurologically wrong or deficient with his cognitive apparatus – it was hale and functioned as it should for someone of his mediocre and standard intelligence. If being bereft of the ability to imagine was an affliction, then the ranks of the docile, passive and imaginatively inert might be a concern for the Centre for Disease Control. Money would be poured into labs to find a cure, one that could be condensed in a pharmaceutical candy. But he did his duty by the nation without fail, remembering to vote as often as possible with wallet in hand, credit card details saved on his computer, or by chip-embedded debit card, at many of the consumers' many election booths of rampant and spectacular capital.

The images of the world rounded on Paul, its constant barrage of our affluent age and discount flights to exotic commercialized Edens. The torrent of images in which he lived had edged out the creation of his own images, colourful interruptions that succeeded in placing his mind in a foggy, numb alienated state awaiting its next stimulus-jolt.

Having no imagination bothered Paul, even if he did not know when the realization first bloomed from a svelte shoot irritating the bland, arid soil of his thoughts into the full flower of a problem. He could opt to add a creative hobby to his regimen of work and digital entertainment, but he bristled at group togetherness in the flesh. He could also spend the whole day taking alternate routes, wearing an absurd hat, or try to sculpt a monster out of his lunch, but the effort of these erratic pokes at imagination seemed as equally banal as doing everything in a regular, rote way.

The decor was scrumptious, an edible series of rooms in caramel and chocolate tones, a picture enlarged for showing the texture of foods no one would choose to eat but instead gawk at once it hove into cinematic view – an appetizing decor designed to draw people to the table and eat something else, all the while wondering if licking the wall

would taste better than the rubbery genetically altered vegetable greens on offer. In such an environment, house pets would be faux-furred paperweights or doorstops, mirth would simply be a cool smear upon the vitreous surfaces, and domestic warmth would be the blind screen of a furniture catalogue with actors playing the happily wedded in their sterile, tepid like-nest.

Paul poured another cup of coffee into the slops of his gut and stirred until they thickened and curdled around a quarter-digested vitamin-fortified cereal bar, the crumbly and healthy kind that disintegrates as partially digested halfway down the oesophagus. The cup once held as a precious thing first thing in the morning had lost its heroic status and was demoted to the other filthy ones of its kind grumbling around the sink. Paul, debating over the highly debatable object the wireless company had given him as a contract-signing enticement, checked the remaining charge on the cell phone. Perhaps it might make the day, and perhaps not – he resolved to turn it off by lunch, and this resolution would stay in his pocket.

In this gnomish hutch among many of its semi-bourgeois kind, Molly called down.

“Paaaaul,”—her voice a vibration weapon intent on nagging its target into submission. “Remember that we have to go out to Reno Barn tonight to look at paint.”

There was nothing presumptuous about their pseudo-emotional banter. Paul replied with a loud “ok!” without indulging her with a reprimand that, firstly, he didn't need to be reminded (actually, he did), and, secondly, there was no need to qualify why they needed to go to Reno Barn, for that had been over-discussed the day before. Simply the mention of Reno Barn – the neon effulgent yellow fast food version of a hardware store writ colossal by a handyman god for unhandy middle class do-it-yourselfers – meant two things to Paul: it had to do with repainting the familyless family room, and it would be a dull sawdust-infused act of wandering stupid in deep trenches of product, each section of aisle “an affordable project idea” for those who wanted space-saving or space-eating solutions.

Paul snuggled his fuel inefficient life in his fuel efficient car and backed out onto the muddy foreshore between where his driveway ended and the gap before the wavy street began. The embankment of two-storey homes drenched in pastel and accented by spindly young trees and their plastic braces echoed back the sound of the engine rasp as he spasmed to a perfunctory stop placed there with every honest intention as a traffic calming measure. The fretwork chain of houses flanking this asphalt ribbon threw up their best face, foaming with feigned affluence, restrained by garden ornaments of gnomes and angels and plastic flower-boxes in the shape of lambs. Each house glowed with the ambitious aristocratic dream of the occupants inside writ in miniature. Once his car gobbled another block, he would connect his on-board MP3 player and listen to songs he had downloaded, all in an effort to forget that he was driving to work while birds puled senselessly in the nose-hair tufts of municipal trees.

Paul's job description could fill a paragraph. In fact, when he applied for the job, internally, it was a paragraph of “the candidate will be responsible for”s, prefaced by a two-mouthful title that could be pared down – title and function – to simply “clerk.” Paul was not just any clerk, or so the positive reinforcement team-player propaganda would insist, but a clerk at Sublime Solutions Management, the premium, world-class corporation for managing solutions. If one were to apply just a bit of pressure to the semantics of the business name and its mandate, one might question why solutions need

management, and with just a bit more pressure, SSM Inc turns out to be one of those bridge businesses that produce no product or service save for providing a service between services, the equivalent of the crack between couch cushions that accumulates pocket change.

Paul found himself parked outside the irregular ridged glass face of SSM, another oversized refrigeration unit in a block spotted with much of the architectural same, the triumph of box modernism. Entering the lofty yet sleepy ice cube, Paul made abbreviated conversation with his colleagues before setting himself down to a very busy day of getting in as much online video gaming and personal emailing between short bursts of obligatory work. For this he was paid as well as anybody else who did the same thing, each part of a lumpy cosmos of paunchy employees at their twinkling computer screens, eating chocolate bars.

Hey! What do you think so far? Is this guy for real or what? Why not follow Paul Imago on his FeedingFriendzy account? Handle: **PIMgo82**

In a cutaway office, walls cladded with excellence in service plaques and an ugly triffid of a fern in one corner, sat the supervisor, rummaging through files. His glabrous and obscene head shone with perspiration and not one of his teeth could ever be caught unsmiling – unless, of course, he was disciplining an errant employee. Then, all his teeth would recede behind an instructional frown, transforming his goatee into a drooping, flat tire hung from the hook of his nose. In the remaining crust of business gung-ho esprit, he was a kind of George Babbitt, and his name was indeed George even though everyone knew him simply as “Peters.” When Paul was summoned into the office, George Peters was in his smiling mode.

“Paul, my good man, how are you?”

“Not bad, I -”

“That's great. Now, listen, there's some rolling thunder around here, and you may have heard that the brass are sharpening their blades, if you get me.”

Paul nodded, but he did not “get” what Peters was getting at. Half the time it was impossible to decipher this blithering mash-up of corporate homily.

“Now, I don't want you to worry yourself with any talk about layoffs.”

Paul froze at the mention of the word. It was a hoarfrost word and his skin was teeming with the tingling insect legs of early onset panic.

“Layoffs?”

“Now don't you worry! You're worried, aren't you? Aren'tchoo?” Peters was pointing and giggling as if Paul was the naughty culprit for cutting a good-natured fart.

To Paul, this was not funny, and he wondered why Peters would find the prospect of layoffs risible unless there was good news to follow it up, or if it was just a joke.

“Don't worry, Paul, seriously. It's not likely they'll touch our department, but even if they did – which is a very remote possibility, very remote, get me? We're invincible!—Even if they do, you don't need to worry. That'll be all, Paul,” Peters concluded, stopping short of the vile camaraderie remark – usually some drivelling morale boost wrapped in a rancid cliché – he generally rumbled off on his employees.

Paul was dismissed, unsatisfied with his supervisor's explanation – or lack of one.

There was no explicit guarantee of his own job security. He was simply told not to worry, which was always an invitation to worry in earnest. It seemed to Paul that a similar unrevealing spiel was given to his colleagues because even the clicking of mice had become morbid, albeit quicker since gaming and emails were set aside to do panicked work. And why would SSM give away in advance who was getting chopped from the “team” when it was better to inspire a bit of fear and get maximum productivity from those that would stay and those who would go? Was it just a scare tactic? For all the company's gassing about security and family and all the other glittering tropes, none of it lifted the heavy nausea pressing down on the mephitic concoction of coffee and cereal bar. An hour later, Peters was leaving his cutaway, for he never bobbed out of his office to the back stairwell unless summoned by a higher member of that nesting doll of bureaucracy to receive divine instruction. Sick, tame, and dreading the demoralizing process of finding another job, Paul felt his entire future was tucked well behind him. Paul did finish his day with no bulletins about imminent release, which would have worried him less if one of his office-mates was clearing out his desk. Would it be all at once, or a phased process? How deep were the cuts going to go? It was unthinkable to Paul to inquire if he was going to lose his job in the fear that he might get the reply he did not want.

“We have to go tootle to the mall first,” Molly informed Paul as she slid in just as he paused the car on the driveway. “We need toilet paper.”

“Can't we just pick that up at the grocery store on the way back from Reno Barn?” he ask-whined.

“It's cheaper at Dollar Empire.”

It recurred to him this patent absurdity of all these discount dollar shops and the sanctimonious, lavish conceit of their titles – king, kingdom, palace, castle – as if to conceal the fact that there was nothing princely in purchasing mass-produced crap from China or other such places with lax labour laws. But, then again, the titles made sense as their serf-like dependency on cheap goods attested. He wanted to protest against the rasping quality of the toilet paper, but the subject of ass-wiping, its sociopolitical nuances, and the delicate concept of comfort were not agreeable conversation for Paul to have with his wife. It was, after all, not about toilet paper: it was a ruse to go to the mall.

He knew what going to the mall meant: it meant power-browsing as if in a state of consumer malingering. They arrived at the tribal terrarium of the mall, its entrenched villagers choking green tea in lidded sippy-cups as they traversed yawning swathes of speckled tile laid out in blocky and meaningless geometric patterns. Instead of carrying each other in shopper bondage, they agreed to part ways and meet in an hour, leaving the other to become a potential sales-seeking missile. Glass front, concourse, and the faint smell of urine sweetened with all-purpose cleaner – the mall was a sci-fi synth-flesh turd oozed from a tube on a glut of strewn plastic bones wherein this body beat the tiny but historically indestructible heart of the bazaar. This was a living shopping catalogue, the reconstruction of an image in three-dimensional gloss. And everyone was inside it – fleecers and fleeced alike.

It was as inevitable as greasy fingerprints left on the high gloss thermofoil countertops: the need to buy would overpower the need to conserve. Blaring sale advertisement sideswipe would be answered by debit card impulse purchase swipe in the rat-a-tat of economic duty. Both retailer and customer knew the transaction had to

be conducted as quickly as possible, for lagging consumer guilt was not far away – temporarily in abeyance before intervening with its prudential NO. By the time consumer and guilt were reunited, the latter would be given the slip once more, orphaned at the food court, while consumer dashed into the electronics boutique to purchase gooey-shaped, silvery gadget-toys in a reckless panic of personal finance depleting haste.

Sated and rejoined by his resigned, belittled guilt, Paul made his mindless march to Molly who he hoped to catch in an act of frivolous purchase so as to misdirect his anger and make her pay for his own regrets. Such was the way the emotional credit system worked between them. Paul was torn: with his self-righteous credibility compromised by the proof of his own gleaming impulse in a bag of overpriced loot, he would have to rush to the parking lot, locate his car in a sea of its clones, ditch the evidence in the blind silence of the trunk, and reappear at Molly's side to play shopper-chaperone. By then, she would have already purchased the lingerie or impractical shoes, stuffed in a mocking bag that would crinkle, “and there's nothing you can do about it now.”

But Molly was not following her usual shop-grazing route. Paul caught sight of her yellow and white-striped wind-cheater at a crafts store, mulling a needlepoint starter kit in her hands. Buttressed against her denim leg were the two cheap toilet paper packs she said she would buy. Refining his disgust and lack of understanding for all handiwork hobbies (for they signalled a distraction of attention best lavished on him), he grunted disapprovingly at the hokey for-lonely-seniors packaging and was distracted by the purpose-built playground cum holding pen for children. There, hyperactive kids, made irritable by the glacial pace of forced shop-trudging with their parents, could enact their misguided rage at each other in what looked to be an enormous, mechanized, plastic maggot. While the children in the play enclosure were glad to be free from their parents, the parents slumped on the flanking benches and were now free to reflect philosophically on all the things they shouldn't have bought. Babies, and infants too small to join the rambunctious throng in their violent dervish on and in every surface of the mega-maggot, wailed or cooed for the benefit of their exhausted parents.

The dreaded thought scrambled toward Paul, flung its nimble simian presence into Paul's ear, and rattled the cage behind his eyes as he feigned absorption in what Molly was looking at. Hopefully, being rapt at the utterly banal objects capturing Molly's interest would keep her distracted from his having noticed the children, mistaking his careless glance to be an invitation to resurrect the discussion of having children of their own. The elasticity of said discussion's duration had much more stretch capacity than his patience. In the last year, his excuses had become feeble: he used to admonish her for being irresponsible and selfish to even think of breeding given their finances. But, with a promotion and seeming job security, the nature of the excuse had to change. For two months, he resisted her battalion of arguments in favour of spawning helpless, slobbering mini-thems with his heartfelt and vague “I don't feel ready to be a parent yet, not fundamentally and spiritually.” This was a phrase he found by accident on a new-agey hippie-soft forum on child-rearing on the Internet. He had been trickily misdirected to that site while looking to download add-ons for his serial code cracked game. And both worked, for a while. The game's add-ons had faded in their novelty, and the novelty of Paul's sensitive excuses had vanished for Molly. Now, when cornered, his pickled emotions let out briny squirts of petulance and brackish gushes of rebuffs. At least now,

although admittedly a grim use of circumstance, the upshot of his job's potential impermanence would be fresh defense against the prospect of parenthood.

The subject of reproducing was not jarringly plonked down in this temple of consumption. She replaced the needlepoint starter kit and they left having made their purchases in peace. The earrings that she wanted were now in her jeans pocket, safe from the knowledge – and subsequent financial moralizing – of her husband.

Outside the mall, developers had thrown up a derelict scrap yard of a commercial zone well beyond human scale, as if gods had littered enormous chunks of formed packaging. Commercial occupancy was near full, each malformed concrete strip with corbelled signage boiling with three or more businesses doomed to fail and be replaced by another round of brazen would-be failures drunk on their own sales guff. The entire area was a commercial blight on blocks, but Paul had no choice but to direct his car in the direction of Reno Barn, lodged in a wasted stretch of boxy outlets where Reno Barn could be among its architectural confreres.

Mitigating the unspoken and ongoing debate about parenthood, Molly elected to burden paint selection with the full weight of it, finding a proxy issue through which to extrude her acrimony. The tall bay doors swished open at their approach, and husband and wife found themselves in a construction materials and hardware fantasia. By the paint counter with its paint brand displays of endless shades of beige, Paul and Molly had roped the badge-titled “paint expert” in their bickering, transforming his role to that of marital diplomat.

“Pistachio will go well with the brown,” Molly insisted.

“I hate pistachio. Brown goes well with brown.”

“That's so boring. We need some *colour*, Paul. We desperately need colour in our lives.”

“Brown is a colour! Am I right?” Paul appealed to the awkward “paint expert.”

“You have to agree that a little bit of colour is okay,” Molly said to the employee, squeezing him for agreement.

And then, completely out of bounds, Paul fired: “I don't see what's wrong with the paint we already have. Why all this hullabaloo over something so unimportant?”

“Paul,” she chided. “We *agreed* to do this. You *agreed* that the family room needed to be redone.”

Molly had took Paul's silent surrender to her badgering the night before as proof of his agreement. Paul had took his own refusal to continue the marathon discussion as proof of impasse.

The employee sniffed the possibility of a lost sale. Paul relished the defiance of his betrayal, his push to kibosh the idea and return to status quo. He knew this would leave Molly in defeat.

She wasn't beaten: “We are going with pistachio and that's that.”

“To paint a pointless room we don't use,” Paul dug in.

“Yes, to paint a room we don't use because you're too skittish about starting a family,” she shot back cold, shifting the debate into an open space that brutalized the idea of sacred and intimate privacy between spouses.

“You don't just 'start' a family, Molly. It takes planning. It's not like getting a dog.”

“Can we not do this here, please? Let's just get the damn paint and go home.”

“Brown.”

“You're not going to give up until you get your way, are you?”

“What are the dominant tones of your existing furniture?” inquired the employee, trying on one hand to be helpful, and the other to force all parties to entente.

“Neutral,” replied Molly. “So I'm not worried about adding a bit more colour. Maybe you can talk some sense into my husband who seems to have some sort of trauma about colour.”

“I'm not afraid of colour, damn it! I just think pistachio is hideous!”

“Okay, Armani, what colour would you suggest?—and don't you say brown or I'm going to scream.”

“I see nothing wrong with brown. No other colour will really go. The problem with going with a colour is that you get bored of it.”

“Oh, for... Augh! Paul... Paul,” she said trying to keep herself from escalating into a full rage, “If we get bored of the colour, we can paint over it. We can even go brown someday. Let's just try to do something different with our house, just this once?”

“What do you mean? It seems that's all we do is change things around!”

“We haven't put any money into the house for ages, Paul! What have we done in the last year? We bought a new flatscreen television. You got me a spice rack for Christmas I hardly ever use. You stained the deck. Wow. Thrilling!”

Paul could not understand why Molly had equated making improvements to the house with entertainment. He blamed those home reno reality TV shows with the sexy carpenters and incompetent helpers. He was being emotionally ambushed for all the wrong reasons. The subtext of Molly's grievance with Paul's reluctance to be the handyman had more to do with his reluctance to start breeding.

Molly abandoned the attack and tried her hand at placating instead: “Listen, Paul, let this be my thing. I'm not asking for much. Just... let's try it? Let me have this room, just this one room?”

It seemed to work, but Paul upended the conversation by rejecting the desired conclusion: “Brown, and that's it.”

Molly, not prone to public scenes, uttered an expletive, and huffed out of Reno Barn. Paul followed with no rush. Their expedition to Reno Barn a failure, they drove home in the kind of silence that boils over when too long unattended. Slamming the car door, Molly entered the house and storm-clouded her bedroom while Paul sought to distract his anger by going to his “office” and shooting well-armed cyborgs online for no less than three hours.