

Note: Instead of showing a better world, this text shows a very bad one, the goal being that the reader finds the answer as to what a better world would have to entail themselves. So without further ado:

A Nightmare

My father always seemed to me like a completely normal person, and little did I know that he had in fact once been the ruler of the world. One day, visiting him, I looked through his basement searching for a long-lost picture he wanted to see one more time before he died. Instead, I found a strange device, a kind of metallic box with many different buttons and control knobs and a little opening from which you could hear strange voices, and another whose purpose I didn't know. I walked upstairs with it and showed it to my dad. Tenderly, he took it into his wrinkled hands and smiled. "Ah yes," he said. "I remember. I used to rule the world with that thing." I was shocked, naturally. "I bought it on a fair many years ago," he said. "It was only when I got home that I realized that what I was hearing were people's thoughts, some of them important and powerful, some of them not. Those were uncertain times back then, and I could speak to them and they would listen. It stopped working someday. I don't know, maybe you can fix it." "I will try, father." I said. He died shortly thereafter, but I had won something much more important than I had lost. I could subjugate the entire planet to do my bidding; I could rule the earth as its unquestioned and unknown leader. If only the voices would listen to me once again, if only...

John was driving home after a long and exhausting day at work. He turned on the radio to hear the news. "President Mosred is once again struggling with..." He turned the radio off. Such incompetence in government was simply beyond belief. The President, a dementia-ridden old buffoon, incapable of doing anything but looking more and more confused every day, his unruly subjugates even more incompetent... Where was the leadership? Where was the man who could just say: "This is how it is to be done.", and do it? It was simply beyond belief; there was no other way to say it.

John's inner monologue was almost verbatim ripped off from the 2035 bestseller "Where is the man who can just say: 'This is how it is to be done' and do it" by Maxwell S. Gorndonson, in which Gorndonson, whose qualifications include being the host of the popular podcast PoliTalk, writes about the failures of the Mosred administration in passing his legislation. It lay unread next to John's bedside table, but he had looked through it and found this passage that he liked so much because the other people at his workplace had talked about Mosred's incompetence and maybe he could impress them if he could also talk about Mosred's incompetence, and they would finally realize that he was in fact a brilliant man who could express his views eloquently and precisely. What he liked about Gorndonson was how completely self-assured he was. He sat there with some other guy, talking about this and that, and he would say: "You know, they don't have our interests in mind, you know. Both parties. They were bought a long time ago." And the other guy would agree, and since both would agree, there was nothing to question here. And everyone seemed to agree with it, because the President, who had promised so many things, to help people and create a better country, to undo the damage President Jerm had done, was achieving very little indeed, but every day, unchanged, unyielding, he went before the cameras to tell them that everything was going great. Such a weird man, his smile was weird, his manner of speaking was weird, he said weird things, and there was something very wrong with him indeed.

Thus he drove home, and when he got there, he walked straight in, up the stairs, all seen so many times that they were of no interest, and into his apartment and thought to himself: "Finally some

peace and quiet. Time to read a good book and relax.”, but he took out his phone while lying before his TV, but he wanted to read later. He decided to watch the popular show “The President”. The show began with Samuphilus Jerrison James McClacker, the unpopular incumbent President, ordering another drone strike to eradicate a village full of civilians (just like Mosred!). Secretary of Decisions Stanley K. Meritfull was having none of it. “There are innocent children involved, and I will have none of it.” he says. “Oh come on, man.” said McClacker. “You have to start thinking like a politician.” “It’s funny.” Meritfull said, “I always thought that politics was about helping people.” “Of course it is.” McClacker said. “But sometimes you just have to compromise, you know.” He had a weak face, and he talked weirdly, and he moved weirdly, and John felt hatred brewing up within him. Meritfull was quite another matter. Now he stood up and said: “I repeat, I will have none of it, and it is my duty to inform you that you are impeached and that I will now take over your position.” The next half hour showed McClacker crying. His little body shook as the tears streamed out of him endlessly. He screamed that he just wanted to be President, that he just wanted people to love him, to adore him, but that it was all over now, and that there was nothing left but to die. The viewer was not to feel pity for him, as the previous scene had shown what a terrible person he really was. Finally, he crawled out of the room, still weeping, but this could now only be distantly heard as Meritfull turned to the camera and said: “Well, that was something.” He said it with such perfect comedic timing and with such a charming facial expression that it was impossible not to burst out into laughter. “I look a bit like him, don’t I?” John thought to himself as he recovered from the hilarity. He paused and went to the mirror. He turned and turned, but he didn’t. He looked like McClacker. Exactly like him. There was no doubt about it. But ultimately, it was McClacker’s personality that made him bad, not his appearance. In fact, whoever played him was an extremely gifted actor. A kindred spirit, perhaps? He looked up the actor. “McClacker’s appearance” an article said “was created with makeup and CGI to render his actor Harold Grateman, recently voted one of the most handsome male actors of the 2030s, completely unrecognizable. ‘What we really wanted to show with McClacker.’ the head writer of the show, Earl D. Walmer, said in an interview last week, ‘was how evil isn’t something that happens because of evil people, but because of weak and stupid ones. That’s the great thing about Meritfull, because he ultimately symbolizes something that all of us can aspire to: To find those people, and destroy them.’” John threw the phone away, he shouldn’t have been on the phone that much anyway, it was not healthy. He continued watching the show, but it wasn’t as fun anymore, and as he looked at all those self-assured people, talking clearly, facing actual problems instead of small, parasitic ones that ate you up inside, he grew strangely scared. He went to bed, and he looked at his phone all night until he fell asleep.

John dreamed that he had many, many friends. And now all the fear was gone, all the worrying, because the truth now was what he spoke, repeated by a million voices. He walked along the earth, behind him the masses, and there was something small there, he needed a moment to recognize that it was a person, but it was alone, and he had a million voices behind him. The thing spoke in a feeble, sad voice, but he couldn’t hear it over the beautiful sound of his dear, dear friends’ voices. The things’ voice grew somewhat louder now, scared, excited, it wanted to say something to him, it pointed at something behind him, but he didn’t have to listen to it, to the lowest of the lowest. But then a great darkness came upon the world and all his friends were gone, and he looked at his hands and they were old and wrinkly now, so close to death, and he realized...

He woke up with a start. He tried to calm himself down, it would be so much easier if he had those voices, he thought secretly, and he said to himself: “You’re lonely, that’s all. You need to make some

friends, to be more self-assured, and then everything will be alright." He went back to sleep, and when he woke up again, he felt a little bit better.

Walking out of the apartment, he met Theodore, his old friend, living there too, and when Theo saw him, a bright smile appeared on his face. "You know, I barely see you, you working all day." Theo of course, the writer, worked from home, writing his screenplays and other things. "How is everything?" "Well," John said. "It is as it is. The boss, you know." "Yes, of course. Seeing someone?" John scratched his head. "Well, there is someone I'm kinda interested in, but, you know, it's complicated, and..." "Oh, come on. You must believe in yourself. You're a great guy." "Well, I don't know." "But you are, everyone says so." John should've looked up instead of looking at his feet, because if he had, he would've noticed something in Theo's eyes. "Really?" "Yes, everyone says so." "Well, uhm, I have to go now. The boss, you know." "I know."

He felt braver now, and he went over to Mary during lunch. "Hello.", he said. "I can't believe it.", Mary said. "You fucking loser." "Uhm, have you hear how Mosred failed to get his, his law passed?" "You imbecile." Mary said. "You idiot." "You know, his legislative achievement..." "Can you believe this?" Mary said to her friend. "Haven't I told him again and again that I'm not interested?" "I can't believe it." Mary's friend said. "You try to be nice to him at first, be gentle about it, but it doesn't help, he just keeps going." John believed to have noticed some signs of displeasure, although this could've just been his imagination, and he didn't really know what to talk about anymore, but luckily he had memorized that Gorndonson paragraph and thus saved the conversation. "Such incompetence in government is simply beyond belief. The President, a dementia-ridden old buffoon, incapable of doing anything but looking more and more confused every day, his unruly subjugates even more incompetent... Where is the leadership? Where wis the man who can just say: "This is how it is to be done and do it?" It is simply beyond belief; there is no other way to say it.", he rattled off, in a monotone voice, while Mary was now screaming at him with fury, and he then returned to his booth. His brain was also screaming at him, but he tried to shut it off, after all, it always overreacted to everything, and hadn't Theo said all those nice things? The screaming was still there, however, maybe more subdued and quieter, and he wished he had someone else's brain, a brain that thought thoughts that it believed, that it did not question, that was sure what it was. Like Henry's, for example. Henry was his most popular colleague, always telling brilliant jokes, always self-confident, everybody liked Henry. He wanted a brain like that.

Little did John know that Henry was convinced that a huge yellow duck was always standing and walking right next to him, sometimes just staring at him with dead, black eyes, sometimes whispering to him. It was all because of that day at the fair when he was a little boy. The duck had been the main prize and all he had to do was shoot down some cans. To the dismay of his father, Henry failed to shoot down even a single can, winning nothing. "I am so disappointed in you, son," his father said, "that I shall leave you, your mother and your two little brothers that you will have to take care of soon because of that rare and untreatable disease that your mother has on your own while travelling the country with my recently formed band and becoming a successful rock star." Indeed he did, and once Henry went to one of his concerts, getting close enough to him that his father noticed him. "Look.", he said to the giant audience. "This is my disappointment of a son." and everybody laughed at him. On that day, the duck appeared. Luckily, it only talked to him when he was alone.

John's boss wanted to see him. Mary had told her about everything, in his view a completely uncalled for action, had they not had that wonderful conversation and all that. Now, here he was, in his chair,

and his boss leaning over her table, yelling at him. "I can change!" he screamed in fear. "You cannot and will not change." his boss said. "I don't know what dark demon told you that you could ever be someone else, that you could magically metamorphose into a better person. Change is an illusion and voluntary change especially. We all think ourselves to be free when we are actually moving on those branchless roads lined out for us at birth, nay, at conception, all heading to that same universal goal. All else is invention of the mind. Life is nothing but small circles, we all spin in nine or ten circles our whole life, then, something big happens, something that appears to change everything, and we move on into the next circle, but instead of loving what we have, what we are living, we are hoping for change, hating our little circle, waiting for the next one, when the next one will inevitably, sooner or later, turn out to be nothing but a variation of the first one, with one thing, that within you, that which makes you yearn and be happy and be sad and be mad, never changing. Can you face that reality?" John nodded. "Of course you can't. That is why I must fire you." With superhuman strength, she picked up John from his chair and ejected him out of the nearest window. "Well." John thought while falling. "I undoubtedly deserve this, but isn't firing me already punishment enough?" He looked down and saw right beneath him a big thorn bush. "Now, surely, this is just a tad too much." he thought. He looked closely. Hiding in the thorn bush was a giant brown bear. "Now, this is just grotesque." John thought. "I certainly don't deserve this." A mistake had clearly been made, after all, what was a bear doing in the middle of a city anyway? The mistake would certainly be corrected soon enough, he just had to wait.

John was riding on a bus, wearing a silver mask so that no one could see his now disfigured face, next to him former President Jerm himself, drunken after a long night of partying, who now talked to him. "You know why I always win?" He giggled to himself. "Except for that last time, but that was an accident. I always win because they can't accept anyone else. They can't bear that someone like Mosred governs them. They can't bear any of the other people. They are imagining someone far beyond that, and they believe-and that is the important thing-and they believe that this someone exists. And so they are disappointed again and again, and they begin to hate these imperfections, their leaders, more than they ever hated their enemies. And they just let it happen, me walking into the White House again, me burning down the world, they will let it happen, because they would rather sink into the deepest darkness than look at their own imperfections. And thus I will return."

There was a giant party going on outside, and thus John couldn't sleep. He felt differently since he had been fired, because there was nothing to hope for anymore, nothing to look forward to. So there were no new messages to check, nothing much to worry about, really. When he heard on the radio: "According to new polls, Mosred's popularity rate has sunk to thirty percent. A Mosred spokesman has declared that these numbers are incorrect and that the actual percentage is closer to 32 percent.", he thought nothing much of it. He knew now that he was pathetic. He was McClacker. He was Mosred. It was a strangely beautiful thought, an immediate beauty, the beauty of the here and now. Recently, he had seen an episode of The President. Meritfull killed 16 assassins with a chain saw. (Why was there even a chain saw in the Oval Office?) Each assassins' life was then shown in great detail to show why he deserved to die. Then John realized something. This is all of us, he thought. We are watching all of us getting killed. Now there was a party outside and it was one of gigantic proportions. It certainly encompassed the city, probably the country, maybe the entire world. He heard screams of exhilaration, Mary's, Henry's, his boss's, everyone's. For one moment, he yearned to be out there, to scream, to dance, to forget himself, to forget who he was, because that, as he then realized with a start, was what they were doing, running from themselves, because the world had gotten to a point where, if they stopped dancing and singing and screaming even for a

second, they would realize who they were, and that would be unbearable. One voice he didn't hear. He walked up to Theo's apartment, he walked through the open door, and there he was, arms crossed behind his back, looking out of his window at the bewitched masses, next to him a little metallic box. He turned around and smiled strangely. "You are here." he said. "Did you hear? They hanged Mosred. It was only a matter of time." "I thought already that it looked dangerous." John said. "We should better stay in here." "Well, why are you not out there?" Theo asked him, looking at him as if he already knew. John had already begun to suspect what Theo really was, and he wanted him to think that he was so much smarter than the others, that he didn't walk into the trap because he was so clever, but he knew that there was no use in lying. "I wasn't invited." he said. "Yes." Theo said. "Please have a seat. Beer?" He took a bottle out, with only one glass, because he, Theo, did not drink, had never drunken anything, had sworn to himself a long time ago that he would never, ever do that. After they had both seated, Theo began to talk. "I have not been completely honest with you, John, about what I am. I am, in fact, the ruler of this world, although it is only now that my power has become absolute, and I all owe it to this box right here and my, if I may say so, truly exceptional mind. With this, I can talk to people's thoughts, and the less they think, the more I can replace their thoughts with my own words. But how do I stop people from thinking? Oh, man is a strange animal indeed. The other animals know what they are, they wouldn't want to get away from it, themselves, more than they would want to get away from the earth. But humanity never wants to be itself, no, it is scared of itself, and would you give it a mirror, it would surely run away in fear. You are undoubtedly familiar with that show I wrote, The President. Shall I explain it to you? McClacker is all of us, he is humanity, look around yourself and you will see him everywhere. Meritfull, then, is what we want to be, that impossible to achieve, nonexistent perfection, but, at the end of the day, only emptiness and air. I made people want to be him, I thus made them slaves to a never fulfillable hope. If people hope, they don't think, if they always yearn for the unreachable, they can never realize what exists around them, here, now. They hated Mosred because he was so human, all too human, and thus he had to die. Instead they have chosen me, just as low, just as strange, just as reprehensible, but hiding in the shadows, slowly molding you into a shadow being that is only happy in those short, fleeting moments of words and empty phrases before sinking back again into that eternal unhappiness, that moment when you talk to your friends and laugh and then you are alone again, and then you sigh, you inevitably sigh, and awareness creeps up in you and you flee from it, maybe looking at your cellphone, what is happening there, maybe drinking something of that sweet, sweet drug that has freed and chained people now for oh so many centuries, it is so easy to flee from awareness nowadays. How then can humanity ever be freed? How could they ever escape from me?" He laughed now. "There is only one thing, and that could never be: They must be happy to be McClacker, there is no doubt. They must be happy to be what they are, only then could I ever be defeated. All the businessmen, all the people in Hollywood, all the producers and writers, have told me the same thing: Life, real life, does not sell. There might be some weirdoes who still want to show the beauty of the world as it is to people, no one reads them, no one watches them, no one listens to them. But now..." He stood up. "You know what will happen to you. You were an interesting test subject, so scared yet so hopeful that maybe you are something worthy, something that may be liked, likable, after all. But then, after that hilarity, oh, how I laughed at your foolery, you gave up hope and so you slipped out of my control. Hope, the greatest evil, foolishly left inside Pandora's box when she could have ruled the world with that alone, is my greatest friend. You will be arrested now, not because you can harm me in any way, as no one would ever listen to you, but just to show you my tremendous power, because I would like at least one person to see it."

John was in a courtroom now, something that was undoubtedly unnecessary, but it was still a nice touch. The judges around him, looking down, read the charges to him. "Do you have anything to say?" John readied himself to make one great speech for humanity's sake, even if it was all hopeless. For one hour he spoke, eloquently, precisely. Tyranny, he said, could not win. Life and liberty were on the line here. There were high ideals, the holiest and highest, that Theodore Regins had stumped on with his feet. And now they all sat there, all doing nothing, while this maniac led the world into ruins. After he had finished, there was a moment of silence. Then, one of the judges leaned forward. "That speech you just made is almost verbatim copied from the episode "McClacker's return" of the popular and award-winning show The President. I shall not allow such plagiarism in my court. Take him away!"

EPILOGUE:

Theo called an old friend of his on the phone. "Hey, Jessica." he said. "Who is this?" "It's me, Theodore Regins. Remember, from high school?" A pause. "Yes, I remember you. Why are you calling?" "Just, you know, how are you doing?" "Uhm, fine. Listen..." "I'm doing pretty good as well. I'm actually, uhm, the unquestioned ruler of the entire planet." Pause. "You know, this is honestly just pathetic." "No, listen..." "What the hell is wrong with you? I think it's best if you work out your little complexes for yourself, and please don't harass me." "What? How dare you talk with me like that? I'm the leader of the world. I could crush you..." She had hung up. "Huh." he thought to himself. "Well, next time..."