

CITIZEN K

“When life’s events seem to belong in a story, embrace the experience, whatever it may be.” Citizen K isn’t certain if he’s heard this axiom before or if he just invented it. But he thinks it’s worth remembering, so he copies it on an envelope and slips it into his pocket. The time is nine pm, and Citizen K sits in front of his computer screen, penned in by the lackluster walls of his office. These late night sessions have become his regular routine, as he toils to make a dent in his workload – a seemingly impossible task. And this evening he’s finding it tougher than ever to concentrate. Leaning his elbow on his desk and propping his head on his hand, Citizen K pokes out the word “quatrogenarian” on his keypad. The internet search bounces back with the correctly spelled alternative, “quadragenarian”, and the definition, “between the ages of forty and forty-nine”. Citizen K sighs and wonders if he’ll ever get any relief from his job. Tomorrow he’ll become a quadragenarian, a status he knows can be associated with both mental and physical stress. On the threshold of this historic gateway, Citizen K hopes his mind and body continue to hold together, considering his ever-advancing years. He believes his looks retain some youth appeal, thanks to a tentative smile, and dark eyes that occasionally flare in an accusatory flash. His height and weight are still in reasonable proportion, and somehow he’s kept most of his hair with a minimum of silver slivers. So his foremost wish for this milestone birthday is to occasionally break loose from the shackles of his job, and for the sake of his sanity, find enough time for a few small pleasures in his existence. He reflects that perhaps this desire was behind his decision to sign up for a creative writing class last month. Could that act have been the start of a midlife crisis? At forty years of age, it’s his right to have one. Citizen K smiles wryly to himself. Having spent his career resolving predicaments instigated by others, any crisis of his own would surely be buttoned down and buried before it could begin. But the concept of a self-indulgent life-changing turning point remains interesting food for thought.

Citizen K regards the array of documents lying across his desk and slumps further in his seat. He has no enthusiasm for any of the tasks spread silently before him. Going back to his computer he pulls up a website for a local theatre group, which is holding a competition to select the productions for its upcoming drama festival. Citizen K scrolls through the pages to find the contest details. After a few clicks he stops and frowns. “It doesn’t make sense,” he grumbles. “They should be paying me for my work, not the other way around.” Nevertheless, he proceeds to fill in the appropriate computer fields to forward a play he’s written, accompanied by a fifty dollar registration fee. The festival runs for two weeks, during which time a dozen short pieces are mounted. Citizen K, who has never had any of his material published, has some optimism that his script may be chosen for this event. Having attended the festival in past seasons, he’s seen a number of plays there which he considers inferior to his own. And while Citizen K is fully aware he’s investing his creative capital in a money-losing venture, he’s still willing to lay his fifty bucks on the line. He speculates that it might be the literary fiction course he’s recently begun at night school, that’s motivating him to share his writing with the greater world. Then he shakes his head to return to reality and reminds himself that he has plenty more company business to finish. However, his inertia persists.

In musings that won’t stay suppressed, Citizen K is still preoccupied with dreams of a mid-life crisis - pondering why he should deny himself this rite of passage into quadragenarian-hood. As these whimsical thoughts transform and change shape like shifting clouds, he draws the envelope from his pocket and adds another line. “If you’re having a mid-life crisis, make sure you know it’s happening.” Taking a thumbtack, he fixes the scrap of paper inside one of his drawers where only he can see it. Then with a deliberate move, Citizen K rises and leaves his office, without clearing his desk or switching off the light.

One hundred and fifty two. Citizen K slows his breathing down to control his anxiety. Nevertheless, he can feel the sweat breaking out on his forehead, as he scrutinizes the illuminated numbers posted over the service wickets. In his clammy left hand he holds the documents he believes are required - credit

card, driver's licence, ownership papers and the renewal form. In his right hand is a tear-off ticket with the number one hundred and fifty three. After gazing at cartoon posters of highway safety propaganda for forty-five minutes, and trailing behind a man who smells of yesterday's cigars, he's finally at the head of the queue. Citizen K has filled out the application meticulously, checking each box multiple times - signing and dating on all the designated lines. But he's always apprehensive at the motor vehicle registration office - worried that some unanticipated government regulation will trip him up, denying him his licence renewal and ultimately his right to drive.

To calm his nerves, Citizen K reminds himself that he's a law-abiding individual with absolutely nothing to fear. He deems himself fortunate that this annual visit to the licence bureau is one of the few face-to-face interactions with civil authorities he has to endure. Based on previous experiences, he's expecting today's episode to be a callously indifferent encounter, willfully lacking in personal consideration. He assures himself he can handle that. But if it somehow shifts into a set-up for him to fail he won't be surprised. That's why his stomach churns as he stands, staring at the numbers overhead. Waiting for the next one to change and for his turn to come.

One hundred and fifty three. Citizen K approaches wicket number four and tries to smile. "Hello." He hands the woman wearing badge number 5461 his paperwork, including the slip proving he is client number one hundred and fifty three. She scans his driver's licence to activate her system, and regards the computer screen in front of her with a look of increasing consternation.

"You have two outstanding parking offences to be cleared before you can renew your licence." Agent 5461 keeps her eyes focused on her computer. "It's two hundred and fifty dollars in total. Do you want to pay them now?" Her question has an impatient edge.

Citizen K is stunned. He can't recall getting even one ticket, let alone two, and he wouldn't have ignored them if he had. After a moment of speechlessness he manages to ask, "Could you tell me any of the details?"

"That information would have been issued with your conviction notices." The woman shows no sign of cooperating. "Are you going to pay?" she persists. "You're holding everyone up."

"Yes... Yes..." He knows he has no choice. All licences are set to expire at midnight on the date of a driver's birthday. Because of pressures at work, he's postponed his renewal until the last day possible.

The clerk peers at his application form. Her finger settles on one of the boxes and she slides the page back across the counter. "This space calls for 'EXACT MILEAGE'," she snaps. "It's in capital letters."

"But I've marked it in," he replies. "Thirty-six thousand kilometers."

"Exact mileage doesn't mean a number rounded off to the nearest thousand," the woman with badge number 5461 has an exasperated tone. "You must provide a reading down to the last digit."

"OK," he makes a motion to adjust the figure with his pen.

"Guesswork is not allowed," the official proclaims. "Go back to the vehicle and check the odometer accurately. Then return to the end of the line." She pushes his cards and paperwork out through the wicket. He notices the flashing display above him has advanced to one hundred and fifty seven, and someone else is approaching the counter. Moving away, he takes another number from the ticket dispenser - two hundred and ten. With several swift strokes he adds a loop and a tail to the last two zeroes in the mileage box, converting them into an eight and a six. Then he takes his place once more in the line-up behind a perfumed woman overloaded with jingling jewellery. Dreading his next bout at

the wicket even more than the first, Citizen K sighs and mulls over the parking tickets he never received, while tinkling taunts of “Happy Birthday to You” reverberate in a distant corner of his consciousness.

“Do you like it, honey?” asks Ellen.

“It’s a... soothing colour.” Citizen K unwinds a few feet of plastic foam from a pastel blue roll. He looks over at Ellen, hoping for more clues.

She jumps out of her chair and snatches it from his hands, opening up the bundle to its full six foot length. “We’ll be able to work out together!” she exclaims. “Mine’s pink.”

“Oh. A mat. For me. For yoga...” He catches on. “All right. Thanks.” He gives her a hug.

“Great!” she replies, laying the sheet on the living room floor of her apartment. “Now you’re forty, you’ll need more exercise to keep in shape.” Since Ellen took up yoga in September, she’s been trying to persuade Citizen K to join her in her training sessions. She claims that performing activities like this as a couple will help sustain their relationship. And now she’s given him his very own yoga mat for his birthday, he has no reason not to participate. “Let’s start with the downward facing dog!” A few seconds later Ellen has laid out her pink pad beside his and is crouching, ready to stretch.

Citizen K has never found the concept of posing in contorted positions particularly appealing, but he’s not averse to new practices or ideas. He takes his place on all fours beside Ellen, feeling somewhat like a puppy relegated to its doggie mat. Carefully he watches as she unfolds her lanky limbs to form an inverted “V”, keeping her hands and feet on the ground, her head lowered, and her posterior at the apex, high in the air. Then he copies her moves.

“No. No. No!” Ellen is wagging her head in disapproval, sweeping the floor with her swaying hair. “Your legs are crooked and your back’s caved in. Straighten yourself out, like me. And take deep breaths.”

Citizen K understands what Ellen is trying to tell him, but her own canine profile falls far short of her instructions. “Can we do this some other time?” he pleads, sinking back to his knees. “I’ve had a long day. It took almost two hours at the motor vehicle office to renew my licence. I was standing the whole time.”

“There were all sorts of different colours,” says Ellen, maintaining her tortuous posture. “But I figured blue for boys, pink for girls.”

“They even charged me two hundred and fifty dollars for overdue parking fines I never knew about.”

“I refuse to pay parking tickets,” Ellen scoffs, peering from between her splayed arms. “I rip them up. The court system is so far behind they’ll never catch you.”

“It also cost me fifty bucks to enter my play in that theatre festival I mentioned,” says Citizen K. “I never thought I’d have to pay to give my intellectual property away. Go figure.”

“What play was that?” Ellen untwists herself into a sitting position. “I can’t keep up with them all.”

“My latest. I forwarded it to you last week. Remember?”

“Oh. Sorry. I haven’t looked at it yet. Better send it again.” She leans her face toward his and they rub noses, in a puppy love gesture they share. “I’m so excited,” she cries. “Next term we can sign up for the synchronized yoga class!”

Citizen K only shows Ellen his writing out of courtesy, as he’s sure she never reads it. So her offhand rebuff doesn’t surprise him. And at the moment he’s more intent on solving his parking penalty mystery. “Labour Day weekend when you borrowed my car to run errands, did you get any tickets?” he asks.

“That was over a month ago.”

“I know.”

“Before I forget...” Ellen starts rolling up her mat. “Monique’s having a Halloween party, and we’re invited.”

“When is it?” He rises to his feet.

“Saturday the twenty-eighth.” Ellen crosses to the refrigerator and pours some post-yoga health juice. “I’ve always wanted to be Dorothy from Kansas.”

“So you’d wear a blue dress, a white smock, and red slippers. That’s easy for you.”

“I’ve got just the shoes,” beams Ellen, offering him a glass of carrot cocktail.

“Which would mean I’m the scarecrow...” Citizen K regards the orangeness of his drink. He is not enthused.

“Or the tin man or the lion,” she replies reasonably. “You could take your pick.”

“Uh-hmm.” None of the characters or costumes excites him. “How about I’ll go as Dorothy, and you can be a munchkin?” he suggests.

“Don’t act silly, dear,” Ellen laughs. “My shoes would never fit you.”

“I’ll let you know. It’s still over two weeks away, but I’m completely overwhelmed at work, and I’ve got a meeting with R.G. tomorrow. That could make things even worse.”

“But honey, these are the kinds of special moments we should make an effort to share,” coaxes Ellen. “And I’m looking forward to playing Dorothy so much.” She massages his neck. “After all this time we’ve known each other, won’t you do this - for me?”

He hunches his shoulders. “Monique would get a kick out of seeing you whether you’re with me or alone.”

“You never want to have any fun.” Ellen sulks. “Not even on a Saturday night.”

“We’ll do dinner or a movie soon. The first chance I get,” he promises, reaching for his coat.

“You won’t stay?” Ellen nuzzles his face again. “It’s your birthday...”

“I really enjoyed our meal tonight, Ellen.” He gives a regretful wince. “But I’m awfully tired.”

“Don’t forget your yoga mat!”

“Thanks for reminding me.” Citizen K grabs his gift, gives Ellen an express checkout kiss and heads through the door.

“I don’t want anything to go wrong,” declares R.G. on this Friday the thirteenth. Across the emptiness of his massive desk, all his teeth are exposed in a broad smile.

“Yes, of course,” replies Citizen K. That’s R.G.’s way. He always makes it plain in advance where the condemnation will fall if his plans go awry.

R. George Maxwell, who prefers to be called R.G., is president of Well-Max Pharmaceuticals. As the company’s director of corporate services, Citizen K functions as R.G.’s personal deputy, so he’s accustomed to having the blame for the organization’s impending failures aimed in his direction. Citizen K senses that today his boss seems more excited and nervous - and overflowing with latent recrimination - than usual. The president has just confirmed with the Prime Minister’s office that the Right Honourable leader will be stopping by Well-Max’s headquarters for a photo op. Well-Max is about to introduce an enhanced line of fertility drugs, and the Prime Minister, who is waging an election campaign, intends to attend the product launch - to endorse these new and improved pregnancy agents as a touchstone for his political party’s pro-life policy.

“It’s less than two weeks from today,” R.G. is fretting. “We’ve got to act fast. Before you leave this afternoon, prepare a memo for my vice-presidents. The quicker they’re in the spin cycle the better. Then you’ll need to form a committee. We’ll have to polish the place inside and out. And arrange a reception. I want daily updates on everything. There’s also security and the media. The Prime Minister will bring some of his people for that. But we’ll issue a press release of our own.”

“I’ll draw up an agenda,” Citizen K confirms, taking notes. He knows R.G. is placated when he thinks his instructions are being recorded.

“And I’ll have to make a speech. Something short but direct. I’ll rely on you for that.”

“What staff should attend?”

“Senior managers only. And tell them to keep their mouths shut. We don’t want random comments slipping out.”

“OK.” Citizen K makes a notation.

“By the way, we’re going to hold the Christmas Party early this year. On the second Saturday in November.”

“November eleventh?” Citizen K checks his calendar. “That’s Remembrance Day.”

“My wife wants to get the Santa dance over with as soon as possible. She tells me we’ll have too many conflicts with other events if it happens any closer to Christmas.” The president shrugs as if he’s merely following orders. “So you can round up the usual gang for that.”

“Sure.”

“There’s quite a lot on your plate right now. You could probably use some help. Better find yourself an assistant.”

“Thanks, R.G., I will,” Citizen K sounds grateful. But deep in his frustrated insides he’s screaming – “NOOooo!” He already has a crippling workload. The extra burden of hiring and training a new employee amounts to just another unwelcome chore with no immediate benefit. The president’s latest assignments aren’t the only projects Citizen K has to struggle with. He’s also under R.G.’s gun to raise the diversity ratio for women, visible minorities and persons with disabilities at Well-Max’s headquarters. The government has set strict standards for what R.G. calls its circus and clerkess quota, and it’s up to Citizen K to devise strategies and schedules to demonstrate compliance. It’s a hopelessly tedious business generating more paperwork than progress. So while he would like to explain to R.G. that it’s smarter to bring on a trainee after the Christmas party when he has more time, Citizen K knows it would be a total waste of words. He’s well aware that R.G. has no concern for his rational suggestions or silent howls of protest. There’s simply no room to negotiate once his boss gives a command, especially when he’s supposedly offering support.

“Anything you need – go for it.” R.G. rises, signaling the meeting is over. “Just as long as nothing goes wrong.” He grins once more and thumps Citizen K on the back. “Have a good weekend!” Citizen K considers the monumental tasks ahead of him and wishes the president possessed the wit to be making a joke.

Ten or fifteen minutes before seven pm, they start drifting into the classroom. The obsessive compulsive humourist always arrives first. He occupies the same seat every Monday night, where he arranges and rearranges his papers in silent concentration. The abused memoir girl is often next. She seeks what she considers an isolated spot and leaves her coat on. The incomprehensible poet never sits in the same place. He begins doodling as soon as he’s settled. When the Hollywood ending security guard comes in, he usually drops his backpack and says “Hi,” but the others avoid eye contact. Then he ducks out for a smoke. Citizen K notices their quirks and contemplates writing a story about their secret lives. But he decides against it - they’re too stereotypical. But who is he to judge? He expects they label him the sell-out to the man, who’s desperately seeking creativity even though he’s stale-dated. The sci-fi trilogy novelist with the piercings is always a few minutes late. She rushes in with her coffee cup and nods hesitantly to the published author who conducts the literary fiction course.

The published author is Wesley Wolseley-Worcester. On the jacket of his debut novel, *Tumbleweed Kiss*, are phrases of praise such as “lingering lyrical lines”, “a saga to rock the Occident”, and “a conspicuous new talent soars full fledged”. Citizen K hadn’t heard of him or his recently released book before he signed up for this college night school course. And he hasn’t made it past page twenty-six of *Tumbleweed Kiss*.

Wesley Wolseley-Worcester starts each class by discussing an issue pertaining to the writing process and relating his personal background. Tonight he’s explaining the perpetual problem of how publishers only have time to read manuscripts submitted by agents, while no agent wants to represent a client who hasn’t been published. The novelist strongly emphasizes the point that an unknown writer has virtually no hope of emerging from an editor’s slush pile. He also assures everyone that his own experience was so unique it could never be repeated. He married the head of a publishing firm’s daughter. She not only assisted him in seeking literary guidance, she also set him up with an agent, an editor, and an executive at the arts council grant office. As the author brags about his lavish government funding, Citizen K can’t help thinking about his parking fines. Wesley Wolseley-Worcester also discloses that although their marriage ended just before his book was released, he and his former wife have remained friends. When the Hollywood ending security guard asks the novelist if his ex-wife likes men in uniform, Citizen K ponders the fact that Wesley Wolseley-Worcester hasn’t offered to introduce any of his students to his publishing contacts.

Turning to last week's homework, the author directs the group to take out their assignments, which were to be stories limited to just fifty-five words. Citizen K is the first to present his piece, which he has titled *The Devil Rules*.

"You were the world's most evil dictator!" God roars. "Your barbaric wars killed millions. I forbid you the privilege of Heaven! Go to Hell!"

"Welcome, Sir!" exclaims the Devil. "Warm yourself by the fire in the Brimstone Lounge. Fifty courtesans await your pleasure. Feeling comfortable?"

"Like I've died and gone to Heaven," smiles the tyrant.

Citizen K believes that within the confines of its brevity, the story is catchy and cute. When he finishes reading, there's a silence that continues a little too long. Finally, the incomprehensible poet speaks. "I'm sorry, but the material feels too cut and dried to me. There's no appeal to the senses. I hear the words "fire and brimstone", but I don't smell the smoke or taste the sulphur. And the courtesans lack lust and lustre." He glances around, his eyes polling the group for consensus.

"You used the short form, "I've", says the obsessive compulsive humourist. "As that's a contraction for "I have" which is two words, the total count is actually fifty-six." His remark doesn't appear to be tongue-in-cheek. The abused memoir girl maintains her silence. But her appalled look and the tortoise-like way she hunkers into her coat convey her conviction that the insensitivity and moral bankruptcy of the subject matter is entirely inappropriate.

The published author weighs in next. "I have to confess that it sounds more like a joke than a story to me," he says. "The characters are too cliché to arouse our feelings – sympathetic or otherwise, and the construction of the dialogue is merely journalistic." He gives Citizen K a doleful look. "It just hasn't got the substance to back up its punch lines. So it can't be considered literary fiction."

Citizen K thinks he hears the sci-fi trilogist mutter, "This is bullshit." He wishes she would elaborate, but she says no more. Citizen K isn't particularly surprised by any of the criticism. But he's still discouraged that in a literary fiction class, he's been deemed incapable of producing the *raison d'être* of the course. It reminds him of grade three, when he was told to mouth the lyrics while the rest of the school choir was singing. As the others go through their stories, he reckons that the group has probably used more verbiage to quash his passion for creative writing than the mere fifty-five – or six – fateful words he selected to showcase his alleged lack of literary credibility.

At the end of the evening, Wesley Wolseley-Worcester reinforces his earlier message on the impossibilities of finding a publisher and recommends that everyone pursue self-publishing, either on the internet or through a vanity press. While he makes these pronouncements, he looks directly at Citizen K. Then to lighten the mood, he invites the class to bring their copies of *Tumbleweed Kiss* to the following session to receive his autograph. In his swirling thoughts, Citizen K tries to fathom how the celebrated Mr. Wolseley-Worcester can presume to urge everybody else to disseminate their intellectual property essentially for free, when he's not only being paid to give this advice – he's being handsomely subsidized and compensated for his own book sales as well. However, his ruminations remain unreconciled.

Wesley Wolseley-Worcester's parting challenge is for everyone to write a poem for next week's session. For better or worse, he doesn't define what a poem might be. As he packs up, Citizen K resolves never to share his literary output of any value with the group again. From now on he'll just mouth the words.

On this Friday afternoon, Citizen K is going over a checklist of all the tasks he has to do before the work week begins again on Monday. With Well-Max's fertility drug announcement coinciding with the Prime Minister's visit next Thursday, there's more than he can handle even by labouring the full weekend. As

he laments how his time is no longer his own, he's notified that the first candidate for the position of his assistant is waiting. Although he views this potential helper as simply another piece of driftwood in the log-jam of his workload, he resolves to approach the interview with a degree of congeniality.

"Thanks for coming, Barbara." Citizen K greets the heavy-set black woman, who ignores his extended hand. "Do you prefer Barbara, or just Barb?"

"My name is Miz Bai-lee, Suh," the woman haughtily replies. "An' you keep me waitin' here twenty minute."

Citizen K is already finding Miz Bailey's accent annoying, and her attitude is raising red flags everywhere. "OK then, Miz Bailey, why would you like a career with Well-Max?" He decides to cut to the chase.

"I am lookin' for ee-sier work than my last job," is her answer. "An' more mon-ee."

"What happened to you before?" He considers her honesty as surprising as it is disturbing.

"My boss was a very ee-vil mon." Barbara Bailey narrows her eyes. "He give me too much to do on purpose, so I could not stand the stress. Such an ee-vil mon."

"Did you have to resign, Miz Bailey?" Citizen K expects her tale of woe to get even worse – and better.

"No Suh," Don't-call-me-Barbara is eager to tell her story. "I get a doctor note for a leeve of ab-sence to ree-leeve my tension. Then I go home to the islands to ree-lax." Miz Bailey's agitation increases. "But that ee-vil mon accuse me of going on va-ca-tion, an' he fire me! Can you bee-leeve the in-jus-tice, Suh?" Citizen K has heard enough so he doesn't respond to the question. But Miz Bailey was not speaking rhetorically. "No doubt you glad to know I be suin' that dee-mon, Suh," she proclaims. "For my per-sonal ree-spect – an' to teach him a lee-gal lesson."

"Thanks for telling me why you want the job, Miz Bailey. We'll inform you of our decision as soon as possible."

"But you not askin' me my qualifi-ca-tions, Suh! Or tell me how much you pay." Miz Bailey sounds anxious - almost alarmed. "I assure you I am very well quali-fied." Then she adds hastily, "But I don't com cheep."

"We'll discuss your experience and compensation if there's a second interview."

"Thank you, Suh." She appears somewhat mollified. "An' please ree-mem-ber - I need a po-sition that will not be gettin' on my nuhves." As soon as Barbara Bailey has departed, Citizen K sends her a rejection letter, thanking the woman for her interest in Well-Max, and clearly stating that she would not be hired. As he glumly looks ahead to a weekend of hard labour, Citizen K wishes he could find a job that didn't get on his nerves.

"If you're not the best at whatever you do, don't expect any recognition – or the big bucks." That's Wesley Wolseley-Worcester's message to the class this Monday night. "And if you're a writer, don't hope to be published unless you're at the top of your craft." Citizen K listens and remembers all the bad books he's read, and wonders how they ever got released. He's even mildly curious about what fabulous prose must lie beyond page twenty-six of Tumbleweed Kiss, given Wesley Wolseley-Worcester's emphatic statements. But he still has no intention of perusing page twenty-seven to find out. "So if your talent falls short of excellence, be prepared to amuse just yourself," is the published

author's final pontification. To drive his point home, he writes the word "EXCELLENCE" in capital letters on the blackboard. Glancing around the room, Citizen K notices that the sci-fi trilogy novelist with the piercings and himself are the only ones not taking notes.

Having set the performance bar at a superhuman level with his preliminary discourse, Wesley Wolseley-Worcester invites the group to present the poetry they've composed for tonight's session. Feeling in his element, the incomprehensible poet is keen to go first. He recites a load of jabberwocky that locks in his unintelligible reputation for all time. Wesley Wolseley-Worcester professes to love it, and acknowledges the incomprehensible poet's supremacy in his genre. Next the Hollywood-ending security guard gets everyone clapping along, as he raps off some intricately miss-rhyming street poetry, in which laws are always obeyed and world peace is ultimately achieved. He's followed by the obsessive compulsive humourist, who has prepared a witty send-up of the ballad *The Cremation of Sam McGee*, which is twice as long as the original. Even the abused memoir girl hits her stride, with a never-ending elegy in blank verse, full of grief and torment dredged from the depths of her personal despair. Unfortunately – or not - she breaks down half way through and finds it impossible to finish. After this tragic epic, the sci-fi trilogist restores salvation across the galaxies with her *Ode to Yoda*, extolling the mighty Jedi and all things *Star Wars*. "Bravo! Bravo!" gushes Wesley Wolseley-Worcester. "I'm so glad I gave you this assignment. You've all risen to my challenge and aspired to greatness." Having claimed the glory for his students' inspiration, the published author calls on Citizen K to provide the poetry finale of the evening.

Citizen K knows he's not a poet. And even if he was, he wouldn't divulge anything of merit after last week's criticism. He's more or less given up on the course and is just going through the motions, so he tosses off a nonsense jingle he thought up on his way to the class.

*I'm a Norman Rockwell poet
And that's all I'll ever be.
My verses rhyme and show wit
But they sure ain't poetry.*

Citizen K isn't particularly concerned about what the others might think about this four-line admission of his poetic ineptitude. And based on Wesley Wolseley-Worcester's opening diatribe, he's expecting the published author to scold him for not having what it takes, and accuse him of wasting everybody's time, including his own. But when he's finished, he hears a chuckle from the obsessive compulsive humourist, who starts repeating - funny... funny... funny... The incomprehensible poet says he likes the Norman Rockwell metaphor, and the Hollywood ending security guard asks if he can borrow the "poet / show wit" rhyme. Although she remains silent, the abused memoir girl awards him the greatest approbation she could give any man, allowing a Madonna-like flush to flit across her conflicted brow. When Wesley Wolseley-Worcester weighs in, it's not with condemnation, but commendation, especially for the self-deprecating humour. He compares Citizen K to Ogden Nash, and believes he may have found his forte.

Citizen K, who has no interest in becoming a doggerel-meister, does not succumb to the flattery. He considers Ogden-'Candy-is-dandy-but-liquor-is-quicker'-Nash to be the classic example of a Normal Rockwell poet, and is insulted that Wesley Wolseley-Worcester would encourage him in the pursuit of such mediocrity. He's also intrigued that no one has given him credit for confessing in verse to his lack of literary talent, which was so zealously pointed out in the previous class. But he finds it most ironic that in just twenty-two slapdash rhyming words, he's apparently vindicated himself from the public denunciation of his last painstaking fifty-five word effort. The fickleness of his classmates' opinion reveals to Citizen K a powerful lesson - that he'll always be the only one fit to determine and uphold the quality of his work. While brooding over these thoughts, he once again hears the sci-fi trilogy novelist

with the piercings murmur, “This is bullshit,” and he notices her scrunching up the paper on which she’s written her Ode to Yoda.

As the evening is winding down, Wesley Wolseley-Worcester instructs everyone to prepare an acrostic paragraph for next week, where the first letter from each sequential sentence forms a word or phrase that reinforces the content of the piece. Then he offers to sign everyone’s copies of Tumbleweed Kiss. Citizen K opens his book to page twenty-six, where he’s drawn a stop-sign symbol at the last section he’s read. When he asks Wesley Wolseley-Worcester to write in the margin beside the mark, the published author raises an eyebrow, but he inscribes his autograph as requested. Closing the book, Citizen K is relieved that he’ll never have to look at it again.

“Are we ready for the product launch and the Prime Minister tomorrow?” R.G. inquires. “And where’s my speech?”

“It’s nearly done. You’ll have it by lunchtime.” With a multitude of last minute preparations still remaining, Citizen K tries not to engage in a conversation. But his boss props his feet on his desk and motions for him to take a seat. Citizen K is apprehensive that R.G. is about to give him a dressing down over a recent letter from the Ministry of Labour, concerning Well-Max’s failure to comply with its circus and clerkess quota. By the government agency’s calculations, their target was missed by three points, and penalties are applicable. However, Citizen K is spared on the workplace diversity front, as R.G. has another bee in his presidential bonnet.

“I was heading down to the controller’s office yesterday, and I overheard a couple of accounts payable clerkesses complaining about their jobs.” His boss’s features contort into an ominous sneer. “We don’t need whining workers at Well-Max. So I want you to put together a survey to check on company morale.”

“Are we trying to identify the staff’s problems so we can make improvements?”

“If folks are looking for cheap cosmetic changes, we’ll do anything quick and easy to shut them up,” replies R.G. “But what I really want is to find the bad apples and then toss them out. So I need names.” He crashes a furious fist on his desk. “Everyone must sign what they have to say!”

“Some employees may not feel comfortable filling out a questionnaire like that.”

“Then we’ll know what side they’re on, won’t we?” the president fumes. “If people don’t like it here they can work somewhere else! We have to get to the bottom of this right away. I need a draft of the survey by next Monday so we can have a meeting with all the department heads.”

Citizen K looks through his boss’s expansive office windows at the sunny view of the world outside. “Monday,” he responds, with an inward groan.

“And make sure nothing goes wrong before then,” R.G. growls.

When Citizen K returns to his office, he scraps the speech he was writing for R.G. and starts fresh with a new approach. While attempting to compose eloquence using words R.G. can pronounce, the sound of the phone interrupts his concentration. “Hey honey,” Ellen chirps, “Gettin’ excited about the Prime Minister’s visit?”

“He isn’t coming to see me, and I don’t want to meet him anyway.”

“But he’s the Prime Minister. Our leader.”

“He’s our chief tax collector, so I do as he decrees and pay the tolls he imposes,” responds Citizen K. “But I don’t believe anything he says or agree with his policies, and he’s just causing extra headaches for me. A nuisance like that I can do without.”

“I’d still like to meet him. Can I come?”

“Sorry, Ellen. It’s a private function. Well-Max executives only. There’s security.”

“Well, if you’re going to be done fussing over the Prime Minister by tomorrow, will you have time for the Hallowe’en party on Saturday?”

“I was hoping to. But I just got another huge project from R.G. and he assigned a Monday deadline. I’m afraid I’ll be working again this weekend.”

“I know you weren’t thrilled with my Land of Oz idea. So I could be Alice in Wonderland instead.” Ellen seems willing to compromise, as long as it’s on her terms.

“You’d still wear the same costume – Blue dress, white smock, but less flashy shoes. That outfit must be the standard uniform of girls in strange places,” Citizen K remarks. “But I’d have to be the Mad Hatter, or some eccentric species of rabbit in a red coat, which makes me less heart-broken about not being able to go.”

“You’re always using your job as an excuse to avoid me,” Ellen snaps. “Why don’t you call back when you figure out what’s really important?”

“Enjoy the party,” says Citizen K. But she’s already hung up.

The Prime Minister has arrived fashionably late, and so far everything is proceeding smoothly. Nevertheless, Citizen K is keeping all his fingers crossed, as R.G. presents the speech he’s prepared.

Pharmaceuticals and Politics today are united.

Right Honourable Mr. Prime Minister, it is my great pleasure to welcome you to Well-Max.

Only by working hand in hand have we achieved our common goals.

Creative minds have come together with a single vision.

Hours upon hours of research time have been invested.

Our tireless efforts have ultimately paid off.

I am pleased today to announce the fruits of our labours.

Childrex – a new generation of fertility drugs from Well-Max.

Everyone, at last, Mr. Prime Minister, can choose to fulfill their dreams of parenthood.

Citizen K has applied Wesley Wolseley-Worcester’s acrostic writing exercise, beginning each line of the address with a letter spelling out pro-choice, which is his personal stand, and contrary to the Prime Minister’s pro-life agenda. As the author of this play on words, Citizen K is the only one in on the joke. Nonetheless, he’s pleased to witness R.G.’s booming voice proclaiming his subversive private protest, which he’s confident is too subtle for anyone else to detect.

When the Prime Minister commences his campaign oratory, Citizen K slips out to the lobby so he doesn’t have to listen. Over the years, the Prime Minister has continually adopted policies that appeal to the lowest common denominator of the electorate. That’s why he’s chosen a pro-life platform, as motherhood is always a popular option. These comfortable stances that pander to the masses are very

convenient for getting elected. But they don't convey any sense of leadership, which is what Citizen K finds most objectionable about the opportunistic Prime Minister.

Suddenly the doors from the meeting room swing open, and the Prime Minister and his people rush through the lobby to their limousines waiting outside. They are chased by the media, who remain milling about once the politicians and their entourage have left the building. Peering around hungrily for someone else to interview, the press descends on Citizen K, who's been taken by surprise by the Right Honorable Member's abrupt departure. Citizen K is pelted with queries such as, "What do you think of the Prime Minister?" and "Will you vote for the Prime Minister's party?" The only response that comes to him on the spur of the moment is, "It doesn't matter who the Prime Minister is - I just keep paying my taxes." Following this statement, Citizen K collects his wits somewhat, and from then on, whatever the question, he only dishes out the company line on the fertility benefits of the wonder drug Childrex. After a few minutes of these pat answers the reporters lose interest.

But for the next twenty-four hours, both broadcast and print media repeatedly run images of a cornered Citizen K with a deer-in-the-headlights expression. Exploiting his candid quote, "It doesn't matter who the Prime Minister is - I just keep paying my taxes", he's portrayed as a disillusioned voter who's lost faith in the democratic process. A company logo in the background clearly identifies his corporate affiliation. However, nowhere in any of the coverage is there a mention of the Prime Minister's visit to Well-Max, or the introduction of the Childrex brand of fertility drugs.

Citizen K recalls R.G.'s original warning. "Tell them to keep their mouths shut. We don't want random comments slipping out." He wonders to what extent his remarks could have upstaged the Prime Minister and the product launch. And he also speculates on how severely R.G. will judge the situation to have gone wrong.

"As you can see from my resume, I took some time off when our twins were born to help out at home."

Citizen K can't remember the last time his morning has started off so well. The young man he's interviewing, whose name is Justin, seems like the perfect candidate for his assistant. Definitely he's all the things that Barbara Bailey was not. First of all, he's Caucasian and athletic. But more importantly, he has an affable and credible manner, and appears capable of pulling his weight in an office environment. "Now I'm ready to re-enter the labour force." Justin concludes his explanation.

"And you held a similar position to the one here at Well-Max before that?"

"Indeed. I was with another pharmaceutical company for five years after I graduated from business school. You can contact my references there."

Citizen K is on the verge of indulging in optimism. Finally he's found someone whom he feels could actually aid in reducing his workload. Perhaps there might be some light at the end of his murky career tunnel after all.

"Thanks for visiting us at Well-Max today, Justin. You'll definitely be hearing from us soon."

"I look forward to sharing more of my ideas when we get together again." Justin shakes Citizen K's hand as he leaves. "Have a good weekend."

It's Citizen K's first meeting with R.G. since the Prime Minister's visit yesterday. The president has summoned him for his annual performance review, through which year-end bonuses are assessed. R.G. has a habit of furrowing his brow when he's irate. So when Citizen K enters his boss's office and

notes the ridges of Himalayan proportions on his forehead, he guesses that R.G. must be as infuriated as he can get.

R. George Maxwell scrutinizes the official appraisal documents in his hand, and then stares at his director of corporate services. Citizen K can feel his blood pressure skyrocketing. "I don't know where to begin," says R.G. "You've screwed up every project I've assigned you. We've got the government down our necks for not employing enough of their hardship cases. I authorized you to hire an assistant weeks ago, and you still haven't done that. And yesterday you totally hijacked the media at our product launch by poking fun at our Prime Minister - while he was a guest of the company." R.G. jabs an I-told-you-so finger through the air. "And I made it abundantly clear that everyone was to keep their traps shut with those nosy newshounds around. So have you anything to say for yourself?"

Citizen K is seething at R.G.'s bullying, and it takes all of his self-control to restrain his temper. He knows his boss relishes loading up all his petty disgruntlements and then dumping them out in one big mess. But Citizen K isn't fooled by this clumsy ambush ploy, and he bitterly resents being so unfairly manipulated. However, he's also aware that showing his anger over the injustices he's being called to account for will do him no good. So fighting to keep his demeanor low key, he chooses to steer clear of R.G.'s most inflammatory shots. "I've interviewed someone I'd like to take on as my assistant," he responds, "And I'm ready to make an offer."

"I'm not convinced you should even have an assistant," his boss barks back. "But I've heard you can't get your work done in regular hours and are staying late every night. So if you're too incompetent to handle your job, I had no choice but to throw another person at your problem."

"I appreciate your support." Citizen K maintains his composure, but his accusing glare is charged with hostility. He wonders if R.G. could ever be generous simply for generosity's sake.

"Don't expect a bonus this year, when I've got to start doling out an extra salary," the chief executive declares. "I'm rating your performance as "Fails to Meet Expectations", and I want to see an immediate improvement." Then with gritty certainty he pronounces his presidential assessment. "Your downfall is that you're too concerned about making everything go right to prevent anything from going wrong." He points at the door. "Now get out of my office."

"Thank you," Citizen K replies. Except instead of "thank", he's thinking another word ending in "k". The only thing he's truly thankful for is that the kangaroo court session has ended.

As he's leaving, his boss calls out, "Don't forget! I want that morale survey on my desk first thing Monday morning. And it had better be good."

"Thank you," Citizen K repeats.

Citizen K arches his back in his chair and extends his arms, stretching his weary muscles. It's now Saturday evening, and he's spent most of the day in his office designing the infamous questionnaire. It's been a tough task, as he's tried to create a form that will yield some useful information, while including the inquisition elements he knows R.G. demands.

To take a short break, he begins sorting through yesterday's leftover mail and comes across an envelope delivered by courier. Inside the package he finds a sheet of paper with the words "WITHOUT PREJUDICE" printed at the top. The document is a letter written by Barbara Bailey's lawyer, claiming that she was treated inequitably in the interview process, and was undeservedly turned down for the job. The letter makes the further allegation that Miz Bailey was the victim of racial discrimination, and

promises to seek recourse through the courts if Well-Max Pharmaceuticals doesn't immediately redress its wrong-doing.

Citizen K is convinced the trouble-making Miz Bailey doesn't have a legal leg to stand on, so he opens his drawer to deposit her poison epistle in his junk folder. But just then, the envelope he tacked inside several weeks ago catches his eye, and he removes it for a closer look. As he re-reads the advice he wrote to himself about cherishing life's most wacky moments and precipitating a mid-life crisis, a sly grin slips across Citizen K's lips. He realizes that Miz Barbara Bailey and Well-Max Pharmaceuticals deserve one another, and it's in his power to bring them together. Quickly he draws up a letter for Miz Bailey, first of all apologizing for the refusal note she received in error, and then offering her the position as his assistant, with a level of compensation fifty percent higher than the maximum rate for the job. Altogether an offer she can't refuse, however badly her feathers have been ruffled. Calling for a taxi, he dispatches the document for immediate delivery.

Citizen K finds it somewhat harder to write to Justin, to inform him that his services won't be required. But he rationalizes that the eminently employable Justin is bound to find a career opportunity with another company that will appreciate him, so his rejection by Well-Max is for the best.

Glancing at the clock, Citizen K decides it's too late to start updating his resume tonight. That chore can wait for another day. He remembers the Hallowe'en party, and wonders if Ellen went dressed as Dorothy or Alice, or both. But strangely, he doesn't seem to care if he ever finds out.

Another Monday evening and another sermon from Wesley Wolseley-Worcester. Tonight he's going on – and on – exhorting everyone to “write what you know”. His words are having the most obvious impact on the abused memoir girl. Her skin is as grey as a dead fish and her breathing comes in constipated yelps, as she nods in helpless agreement. However Citizen K has heard this literary cliché so often before, he decides to abandon the session at the coffee break. Outside, he finds the chilly night air a refreshing relief to the stuffy classroom. In the parking lot he catches up to the sci-fi trilogy novelist with the piercings, who also appears to be making an early getaway.

“That was bullshit as usual,” she comments. “This course hasn't taught me a thing.”

“Me neither. I've been writing long enough to have covered all the points he's raised long ago.”

“What do you write? When you're not doing Wolseley-Worcester's busywork.” She sounds genuinely interested.

“Stories and plays. Nothing that's ever been published. But it's my escape from the daily grind.”

“Yeah. I love the absolute freedom of inventing plots and characters out of thin air.”

“Boldly going where no imagination has ever gone before?” smiles Citizen K. “Venturing from the known to the unknown...”

“Except,” she cuts him off, “The powers-that-bullshit tell us the unknown is off limits.” Her blazing eyes show he's hit a hot button. “I mean - how is someone like me supposed to write what I know?” The sci-fi trilogy novelist stands with her hands on her hips, bristling with defiance. “I create speculative fiction about alternative universes that don't actually exist – it's impossible to *know* about that stuff!”

“All I know is rejection,” Citizen K admits. “It's not exactly the material heroes are made of. Or what anyone wants to read.” He's somewhat taken aback at his candor about himself, especially with a person who has hunks of metal stuck in her eyebrows, ears, mouth and nose.

“Poor you,” she replies. “Where else do you get rejected, besides at night school for hack writers?”

“Mostly at the office. I work for a drug company. It’s pretty intense. What do you do?”

“Systems crap. Computer graphics. Web design. Video games on the side. I freelance, which means I can’t find a proper job.” She shrugs to pretend it doesn’t matter.

Citizen K gives her a business card. “If you hit a slow patch, maybe you can set up a platform for my stories.”

“Sure.” She offers a card of her own. “Check out my site.” Then she slides into her car.

When he reaches home, Citizen K pulls up the drama group’s webpage to see if there’s an update on his play. After verifying that the winning entries haven’t been announced, he consoles himself that it’s been less than three weeks since his submission, and he’s bound to hear something soon.

A week has passed, during which Citizen K, overburdened as ever, has been distributing, collecting and compiling the results of the Well-Max morale questionnaire. In a few stolen moments, he’s also researched a few job openings and sent out some resumes. It’s now Monday morning, and Barbara Bailey’s first day on the job. She arrives carrying a framed paint-by-numbers portrait of Jesus under one arm and a Bible under the other, with the unabashed explanation, “I must pray to my Saviour three times ever-ee working day.” Citizen K fleetingly gapes in amazement at her divine incorrectness, but his inner reaction is laugh-out-loud glee.

As part of her corporate orientation, Citizen K invites his new helpmate to accompany him to the planning meeting for the office Christmas party, which is coming up on Saturday. He introduces Miz Bailey to Penny from accounting, April from customer service, and Chip from the shipping office, who welcome her to the Christmas committee. Penny has already booked the banquet hall and Chip has hired a live band. April announces that the list of attendees is now complete, so the volunteers focus mostly on decorations and the handling of drink tickets for the bar. When Barbara Bailey realizes the event is to be held on Remembrance Day, she insists a minute of silence must be observed at eleven o’clock. Chip from shipping gruffly reminds her that the time for silence is eleven in the morning, not at night, but she wags an uncompromising finger and replies, “Leeve the arrange-ments to mee!” Citizen K kindly accepts her offer and is careful not to pester about the details, as he’s sure Miz Bailey will not disappoint.

Citizen K is pleased to see that his assistant soon structures her workday so any interference with his own agenda is minimal. With her scheduled prayers, personal phone calls, and an extended lunch, she keeps quite busy. She also lets it be known from the outset that she always takes Friday afternoons off for medical appointments. And when Miz Bailey discovers there’s no convenient space available to communicate with her Lord, she immediately drafts a petition to convert a to-be-determined office into a chapel, where she could hang her picture of Jesus. Thus the circulation of the petition and any requisite preaching to her heretic fellow employees occupies the remainder of her time.

As he continues to carry out R.G.’s bidding with no assistance from his assistant, Citizen K becomes more and more convinced he’s made Well-Max’s most extraordinary hiring decision ever.

“Show me the numbers!” R.G. has been heckling Citizen K every day this past week. Finally all the results of the morale survey are in and his report is ready. Citizen K just hopes the president won’t murder the messenger when he learns the truth.

“Eighty-eight percent of the workers are unhappy with their job and the company?” R.G. is momentarily shocked. But he soon rebounds enough to recover his lust for vengeance. “Who are these people, anyway?” he demands, out for blood.

“None of them signed their names on the questionnaire.”

“Cowards,” snarls R.G. “I should kick them all out of Well-Max.” Suspiciously, he turns on Citizen K. “Didn’t you instruct the employees to identify themselves the way I told you?”

“In bold capital letters and italics. But I couldn’t hold everybody’s pen.”

“What about the other twelve percent?”

“They claim to like it here. And they provided their signatures.”

“Liars,” R.G. snorts with contempt. “They deserve to be fired even more for not having the guts to say what they really think!”

“What are you going to do?” Citizen K can’t guess what sort of revenge the president’s wrath will devise.

“For a start, I’m calling off the Christmas party tomorrow.” R.G. seems pleased with the simplicity and spite of his solution.

“Do you think that will improve everyone’s outlook?” prods Citizen K. He’s remembering an old cartoon with the caption: “The floggings will continue until morale improves.”

R.G. is stumped for a second. “Then I’ll just cancel the music,” he retorts. “I have to punish them somehow. Everyone can come for the rubber turkey and speeches. But no dancing allowed.” He nods his head. “Yes. That could be even worse than no party at all.”

“You could be steering the corporate culture in a whole new direction, R.G.” Unfortunately, Citizen K notices this remark brings the first smile he’s seen from his boss in weeks.

The mental tone of the room is dull November grey. No one’s mind is focused on Christmas at this premature date, so the Yuletide banquet feels more like a Remembrance Day wake. Penny, April and Chip have done their best, festooning the walls and ceiling with streamers of red and green crepe and sparkly tinsel. There’s even a brightly lit Christmas tree. But everyone’s thoughts are still on workaday matters, and not on festive cheer. To avoid dampening the mood further, Citizen K contacted the band himself to tell them not to show up, as he didn’t have the heart to mention it to Chip or the others. And in a last-minute attempt to lift the somber spirits of the occasion and compensate for the lack of music, Citizen K has authorized the Christmas committee to allot six drink tickets per person, instead of the customary two. He himself has taken full advantage of this liberal gesture, and is uncharacteristically tipsy.

It’s now past ten o’clock, and R.G. is still delivering his after-dinner speech. “Lately I’ve become aware,” he is saying, “That many – maybe all of you - have developed an unfavourable opinion of the company you work for.” He slowly pans the room. “So tonight I want you to know that there are lots of grateful people out there who would happily work for Well-Max Pharmaceuticals without complaining.” For once, Citizen K hasn’t written the president’s speech, so the audience is being subjected to the full extent of R.G.’s long-winded acrimony. “Think about that,” he glowers, “As you chow down on your Well-Max turkey, and guzzle your Well-Max booze. It’s time to decide once and for all whose side you’re on.” As

R.G. concludes his point, Citizen K doubts this venomous assault could ever succeed in winning back any prodigal employee's corporate loyalty.

As a senior executive of Well-Max, Citizen K's attendance at the party is mandatory. However, he has come to the event alone. He knew he wouldn't be in a frame of mind for celebrating, so he didn't bring Ellen to a function which for him is simply another night of work. And listening to his boss's rant, which is still rambling on, he's more than ever glad he didn't subject anyone else to such rancour. The crowd is also becoming agitated and ugly, both from R.G.'s threats, and the growing realization as the evening slips away that no music or dancing will follow. So as the president's oration goes into overtime, the buzz around the hall, fueled by the free-flowing alcohol, becomes louder and almost frantic. Finally, R.G.'s address lurches to a halt, with a grudging "Merry Christmas". Citizen K checks his watch. The time is two minutes to eleven.

There's sporadic clapping, mostly from relief that the speech has ended. But before it dies out, the drone of bagpipes erupts from the back of the room, and all heads turn toward the noise. A piper wearing a Santa suit emerges from the shadows, tooting "Amazing Grace" at full blast. Slowly he winds his way through the banquet tables, followed by Barbara Bailey, dressed in a brass-buttoned army tunic, with a red elf's hat and green elfin boots with bells. In her upraised hands she carries a large dual purpose wreath, woven from holly boughs and adorned with candy canes and poppies. When they reach the Christmas tree at the front of the hall, Miz Bailey places the wreath around the top of the tree and the piper ceases his hymn. In the minute of silence that follows, the audience is less concerned about mourning the loss of long-dead warriors, than with sorting out its confusion over two bizarrely mixed metaphors.

When Santa McClaus resumes playing, he blares out O Come All Ye Faithful. As if by magic, Barbara Bailey flips a switch which turns the lights down and projects the karaoke words of the Christmas carol on the wall. She begins to sing in a determined voice, and to Citizen K's surprise, the liquored-up congregation joins in.

*O come, all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant,
O come ye, O come ye to Bethlehem.
Come and behold him, born the king of angels,*

What happens next may well have been induced by the six shots of bourbon Citizen K has downed during the evening. But whatever the impetus, at the start of the chorus, Citizen K's scorn for R.G. and his heavy-handed methods wells up until he can't control himself. He lifts his arms above his head, and begins to bow repeatedly in mock reverence toward his boss.

*O come let us adore him
O come let us adore him
O come let us adore him
Christ the Lord.*

On the second verse, Citizen K notices in the dimmed lighting, that people at the surrounding tables are following his lead, and kowtowing with him. And by the fifth and final refrain, as the scarlet piper marches off into the gloom, the whole crowd is singing lustily – "O come let us adore him" - and salaaming in unison to their president and leader. When the carol is over, there's an uproarious outburst of laughter and applause. In the mayhem of the moment, Citizen K decides to make his exit before he's fingered as the instigator of R.G.'s tongue-in-cheek hero worship. He hopes that in the darkened room he might somehow have been indistinct enough to retain his anonymity. But on his way to hail a cab, he catches the eye of Barbara Bailey, and from her Cheshire cat look, he knows she knows.

“How about that speech of mine the other evening!” R.G.’s molars are showing again this Monday morning, with the return of his sinister smile. “I knew if I read the folks the riot act I could herd them back into the fold. I just needed to crack the whip!”

“Yes,” says Citizen K. “Everyone was in quite a frenzy afterwards.”

“I never expected to have all my employees bowing down to me though.” R.G. is totally impressed with himself. “That kind of tribute went beyond the call of duty. But it’s great to see they feel that way.”

“It certainly was a tremendous validation.” Citizen K plays along. It seems inconceivable that R.G. can believe the praise was sincere. But his boss’s thick-headedness never ceases to amaze him.

“You know, I’m going to forget about that damned morale cross-examination of yours,” R.G. exclaims. “I’ve always said actions speak louder than words. And on Saturday night the Well-Max workforce showed their true colours.”

“It was a strong signal all right,” agrees Citizen K, glad to let the misbegotten survey die.

“But I don’t think you’re taking enough credit for what happened.” R.G. leers. “A little bird – or perhaps an overgrown elf - told me you were instrumental in getting all that bowing started.” His boss gives a wink.

It’s evident to Citizen K that his non-assistant has now become R.G.’s personal spy. “I’m sure anything you heard was exaggerated,” he replies, staying under the radar.

“But that new helper of yours is quite a firecracker. A perfect choice for Well-Max.”

“Yes, she’s an exceptional find. The minute I hired her she immediately solved one of the company’s problems.”

“How’s that?” R.G. is all ears.

“As you recall, we were three points shy of our diversity standard,” Citizen K explains. “Of course, Miz Bailey’s a woman. And she’s ethnic.”

“That’s only two,” R.G. cocks his head. “Can we claim she limps as well?”

“I wouldn’t call it a limp exactly,” responds Citizen K. “But she’s pretty heavy. So it’s more of a waddle.”

“A waddle’s as good as a limp, if we can hit our circus and clerkess quota!” R.G. gives Citizen K a high five. “By the way,” he adds. “I heard from the Prime Minister. He told me you’re the kind of citizen this country needs. A person who obeys the law and pays his taxes. You should be proud.”

“It’s nice to have the Prime Minister’s approval.” Citizen K presumes his disapproval could be inconvenient.

“He promised me a seat in the senate if he wins the election today,” R.G. swaggers. “That gets my vote.” He gives a thumbs-up.

“Congratulations,” says Citizen K. “And good luck.”

“I’m changing the paperwork for your bonus,” R.G. pretends to be preoccupied with some notes. “You’ll be getting the same as last year, plus ten percent.” It’s as close as his boss comes to admitting he was wrong.

“Thank you, R.G. That’s great news.” Citizen K still doesn’t mean “thank” you.

“Would you like to come to lunch? I’m going to the club.”

“Thanks again. But my stomach’s acting up. I’d better be going home.”

“Take care of yourself.” R.G. seems genuinely concerned. “Just be sure to vote.”

Instead of heading homeward, Citizen K grabs a burger and then attends an interview for a position he’s recently applied for. However, the job isn’t particularly suitable. But at least the opportunity illustrates there are prospects for a future beyond Well-Max Pharmaceuticals.

Later at the polling station, Citizen K considers voting for the opposition candidate running against the Prime Minister’s party. But in the end he simply spoils his ballot. The election coverage that night reports a landslide victory for the Prime Minister’s government. The news sends a shiver through Citizen K’s bones. He’s repulsed at the concept of “Senator Maxwell”, and hopes the Prime Minister’s pledge was just another politician’s promise.

The next evening during his commute from work, Citizen K tunes into the news, catching the tail end of an interview. “...And I’d like to thank my publisher, and also the Canada Council for the Arts for their generous funding.” The voice sounds familiar, so he turns up the volume as the newscaster cuts in. “That was author Wesley Wolseley-Worcester, whose novel *Tumbleweed Kiss* today received the Governor General’s Award for Fiction in Ottawa.” Citizen K wonders if his autographed copy of *Tumbleweed Kiss* might now fetch a premium price. However, the book is still worthless to him.

When he arrives home, there are three letters waiting. Each one has a black government logo in the upper left corner. Citizen K knows these types of envelopes never bring good news. The first two are from the municipal parking authority. They contain his final conviction notices for the parking tickets he was forced to pay when renewing his licence. The court documents confirm that his vehicle was parked on both September first and second in a no-stopping zone at the street corner where Ellen does her banking.

The third letter is from the federal taxation office. It claims that when filing his tax return last April, Citizen K understated his income by \$41.12. This oversight has resulted in additional taxes owing of \$15.78. With accrued interest and penalties, Citizen K is ordered to remit \$213.89 immediately. Additional interest and fines will be levied if his account is not paid in full within fifteen days from the date of issue of the letter. Citizen K has no idea whether he actually made a mistake, or how it may have occurred, or where any of the taxation bureau’s figures come from. However, he completely understands that the government has no obligation to be reasonable. So, anxious to avoid the Prime Minister’s further disapproval, he immediately goes on line and transmits the amount stipulated.

Over his supper, Citizen K speculates that there seem to be two types of people. Those who win government prizes, and those who pay government penalties. And although he can’t conceive of ever winning a government prize, he ponders how he could possibly accept one if he did.

“You’re having the fries?” questions Ellen. “Not the rice?”

“I just felt like fries tonight,” answers Citizen K.

“Rice is better for you.” Ellen refuses to relent, driven by the righteousness of sound nutrition. Citizen K stays mute, declining to debate Ellen’s deep-fried objections to his menu preferences further. The restaurant is Ellen’s choice for dinner. In Citizen K’s opinion, the food here is generally under-spiced and overpriced. But as they’ve had little to do with each other during his past month from hell, he’s gone along with her wish, in case she still bears a chip on her shoulder over being neglected.

“There’s a yoga competition next weekend.” Ellen resumes the conversation. “Harold says I should go. For inspiration, and to improve my technique.” It’s apparent that Ellen’s into yoga more than ever.

“Who’s Harold?” Citizen K realizes they have a lot of catching up to do.

“Oh. He’s my new yoga instructor. I met him at the Hallowe’en party. He went as Peter Pan and thought I was Wendy.” Ellen giggles for a second. “He’s really good. I’m hoping he’ll take me to a new level.”

“How often do you see him?” Citizen K inquires.

“Waiter!” Ellen suddenly calls, glancing around. When she’s attracted the server’s attention, she points at a wilted leaf in her heaping bowl of greens. “Could you bring me a salad that’s fresh, please?” She pushes her plate aside, and the waiter silently takes it away. Spreading her hands palms up, Ellen gives Citizen K her put-upon smile that never quite convinces. In this instant of calm, Citizen K considers quizzing her about the parking tickets once more, but decides it would be a lost cause. “So honey,” Ellen shifts topics. “Do you figure you’re through the worst at Hell-Max for now?”

“Maybe. I was in R.G.’s doghouse for a couple of weeks, but he’s let me out again.”

“When is your office Christmas bash? It must be coming up.”

“It was last Saturday. R.G. wanted to get it over early.”

“What?” shrieks Ellen. “You didn’t think to invite me?”

“Ellen, I was in no mood for a party. I would have been lousy company. So it wouldn’t have been fair to take you.”

Ellen is staring at Citizen K, her jaw sagging and her eyes popping like bullets. “That’s not the point!” she hisses. “I had no intention of going to the party after you stood me up on Hallowe’en. But you didn’t even give me the opportunity to refuse!” She grips the table and leans forward, as if to pounce. “How dare you!”

“Let me understand,” says Citizen K. “You’re not upset because I didn’t invite you in the first place. But because you were denied your rejection moment?” Citizen K shakes his head in disbelief. “Don’t expect me to apologize for that.” He stuffs his mouth with garlic bread and chews.

Ellen begins to cry. Great blobby tears pool on her cheeks and splash onto the table. “You ignore me for a month, and now you treat me like this,” she sobs.

“Blame my job at Hell-Max if you want, my dear. But don’t blame me.” Citizen K hands her a clean napkin to mop herself up. Silently he reflects that although Ellen may have been robbed of her precious turn-down scene, she’s still wallowing in a surrogate sea of melodrama with her weepy martyr act.

“Where’s my goddam salad?” Ellen cools down somewhat, as she dabs at her sippy makeup and refocuses on her original grievance. Just then, the waiter appears with Citizen K’s main course and quickly scoots off, leaving no replacement greenery in sight. Observing his retreat, Ellen swears, “I’m never coming back here again.”

“Have a few fries while you’re waiting,” offers Citizen K.

Ellen helps herself. “They’re cold.”

“Just relax. They’re my chips, not yours, so don’t worry.” Citizen K doesn’t want any more bother.

“I’m not letting them get away with this,” she declares. “Waiter! Waiter!” Ellen waves both arms and shouts as loud as she can. Even Citizen K is startled. When the server comes running, she commands, “Bring us more fries. These are stone cold.”

Citizen K has had enough. “This is my dinner!” he yells. “Leave it alone!” Then he seizes an overflowing fistful of fries and crams them into his mouth. With his cheeks packed full, and wedges of potato protruding from his lips, he mumbles, “Thaaay aaah ffffine.” He even pushes a dangling piece into Ellen’s unsuspecting mouth, which is hanging open in horror.

Coughing and spitting out bits of potato, Ellen gets up and starts pulling on her coat. “I’m not putting up with this humiliation,” she gasps. “And...and... I never want to see you again.”

Citizen K gulps, swallowing most of his wad of fries. “We’ll have separate checks, please,” he manages to tell the waiter, who is lingering aimlessly, wringing his hands.

“I’m not paying!” Ellen screams. “I haven’t eaten anything!”

“I’ll mail your toothbrush, sweetie,” Citizen K taunts. “And do you want your yoga mat back too? For Tinkerbell?”

Ellen moves in eye to eye with Citizen K. “You have no right to make fun of Harold,” she huffs. “I’ll have you know his downward facing dog makes yours look like a Mexican mongrel.” Her down-and-outraged face is so close he can smell her fuming drop-dead breath.

“Does the old dog know any other tricks?” smirks Citizen K. For sport, he snuffles Ellen’s out-of-joint nose in a parody of their secret ritual. Quickly she jumps away in disgust and finishes gathering up her belongings.

As she hastens to leave, Ellen hurls her scarf around her neck and delivers her parting shot with a disdainful toss of her head. “As a matter of fact, Harold performs the plough better than you could ever hope to!”

Watching her disappearing form, Citizen K can’t help calling, “I hope one day you have kids who grow up just like you!” Determined to have the last word, Ellen whirls and cries out for everyone to hear, “The thing I’ve always hated about you, is that you’re too comfortable with your insecurities to ever change!” When she’s gone, he finishes the rest of his meal in peace. In retrospect, Citizen K recognizes the termination of their intimacy was long overdue. But he’s particularly pleased that in the end Ellen dumped him, which severely undermines her ability to seek a future reconciliation.

For the first time in over a month, Citizen K is taking the whole weekend off. On Friday afternoon he had another interview with the firm he’d seen several days before. The company had called him back,

offering to increase the scope of the position and raise the salary accordingly. Citizen K requested the weekend to think the deal over, but he's pretty much made up his mind to go for it. With the decision made, and his horizons opening wide, free of Well-Max, R.G. and Barbara Bailey - not to mention Ellen - he's enjoying a lazy Sunday morning, with no commitments, agendas or work.

He's already checked the drama club's website for news of his play, but there's still nothing showing. Now as he reviews his electronic mail, he finds a message from an address he doesn't recognize.

"Want to come to my place sometime to have sex? Let me know...Tina."

"Who are you?"

"From the writing class. Remember the parking lot?"

"Hi Tina – nice to hear from you. Thanks for your offer, but I'm going to say no thanks."

"If I'd been someone else, would you have said yes???"

"Is it too late to change my mind? To YES???"

"I'm free on Monday night."

"Me too. Say seven thirty?"

"Sounds like a plan,"

"No dinner or yoga first. Right Tina?"

"Hell no!!!"

"Shoot me your address."

"#403 – 380 Woodward."

Suddenly Citizen K is feeling like a teenager who's just about to get lucky.

It all happens within minutes on Monday morning. Citizen K calls first thing to agree to the job offer, and the acceptance letter is transmitted to him almost immediately. He signs it back and confirms its receipt well before his coffee break. It's only then that the realization sinks in that his new job starts in two weeks, and today is his last day at Well-Max Pharmaceuticals. Citizen K is so elated, he goes into the executive washroom, locks the door, and dances a silent victory jig in front of the mirror.

The familiar walk down the hallway to R.G.'s office feels like a surreal stroll, as his hoppity feet don't seem to be touching the ground. He's seeking a two week holiday starting tomorrow, and he's hoping this final meeting with his boss will be quick and sweet. However, before he can request the time off, R.G. goes on the offensive. "What's that assistant of yours up to?" he wants to know.

"I'm sure she's simply doing her job," Citizen K plays dumb to learn what R.G. has discovered about Miz Bailey's antics.

“I’ve found her all over the building, bothering my employees when they should be working. What’s going on?”

“I’m afraid she’s following my orders,” confesses Citizen K. “I assigned her a project I was trying to keep secret.”

“Secret? What the hell does that mean?”

“I didn’t want to tell you. But I asked her to collect testimonials to your leadership from all of Well-Max’s employees,” Citizen K confides. “The plan was to send these endorsements to the Prime Minister.” Citizen K feels his face go red from the lie, but he hopes R.G. assumes he’s blushing from self-consciousness. “As part of the scheme she’s also asking the staff to sign a petition recommending you for the senate.” He looks down at his shoes, attempting to keep a straight face. “I’m sorry. It was all supposed to be a surprise.”

“That’s a very kind gesture,” says R.G., wiping the corner of his eye. “Don’t let me stop the little lady.”

Citizen K conceals a huge sigh of relief. Once again his boss’s ego has overshadowed his common sense. “But I have to warn you, R.G.,” he declares. “I’ve sworn Barbara Bailey to utter secrecy. Even if you confront her directly, she’s been instructed to totally deny everything she’s up to.”

“I understand,” R.G. nods. “And thanks for your vote of confidence.” He shakes Citizen K’s hand, and gives him a friendly pat on the shoulder.

“My pleasure,” says Citizen K, experiencing a spasm of dirty delight at this bogus bonding moment.

After their pseudo-heart-to-heart conversation, R.G. readily grants Citizen K’s vacation. “You need a break,” the president tells him. “You don’t smile enough. Take it easy. Come back relaxed.” Unaccustomed to such graciousness, Citizen K wonders if R.G.’s already dabbling in senatorial noblesse oblige. If his boss had been reluctant about giving his approval, Citizen K had been prepared to inflict a grave but fallacious illness on his perfectly healthy mother, to force R.G. to allow his leave on compassionate grounds. However, he’s pleased that R.G. was so amenable, and there was no need to twist the president’s arm or compromise his unwitting mother’s well-being.

Citizen K knows his annual bonus will be paid in the two week period when he’s off. As soon as the money’s in the bank, he’ll be content to mail in his resignation to R.G. and spare himself the president’s inevitable tantrum. However, he sincerely regrets not being around for the lively fireworks which will surely explode when the truth about Barbara Bailey unravels. Citizen K muses that once he’s left the company, Miz Bailey will actually afford him some assistance at last. For as his ultimate legacy to Well-Max - with a horde of grim government agencies to back her - she’s the ideal instrument of retribution to teach R.G. an unforgiving lesson on just how badly things can go wrong.

While packing up his personal effects, he pockets the slip of paper with the quadragenarian crisis advice he’s kept stashed in his drawer. He considers these few words more important than all the ponderous files he’s created for Well-Max. As his final activity before departing for the day, and forever, Citizen K joins Barbara Bailey to pay lip service at her prayers. Then he signs her petition, leaving the comment, “Hallelujah! Amen.”

“Sometimes reality is better than fiction,” Tina smiles and licks the foam off the rim of her glass. “We were awesome tonight.” She and Citizen K are in a local bar following their erotic encounter. Earlier they had wasted no time shedding their clothes and cavorting together in a spree of sensual ecstasy.

“What an excuse for ditching our regular Monday blues session,” nods Citizen K. “From now on that class can drag along without us.”

“I never bought into the Wolseley-Worcester self-admiration society,” Tina grimaces. “He didn’t engage me enough to make me want to participate.” She flicks a comb around her spiky hair. “For his assignments I sourced my material from the internet.”

“You mean... the Ode to Yoda?”

“Especially that. I’m no friggin’ William Butler Keats. But why should I let on to that bunch?”

“You were always a little intimidating,” Citizen K admits. “Every Monday you’d just sit there like a heavy metal robot and say, “This is bullshit”. I kept wondering - does she mean my stuff or the course in general?” He pauses for a drink. “Even before meeting up today, I was sort of concerned about how it would go. I thought those things on your face... and everywhere... you know... might get in the way.”

“And?” nudges Tina.

“I can’t remember,” he grins sheepishly. “So apparently not.”

“Now I’ve passed the quarter century point, I think about unscrewing all the hardware that shows, and joining the establishment to make a zillion bucks. But then I get over my quarter-life crisis bullshit and go on with my punk junk and super heroes.”

“Since I turned forty last month I seem to have done nothing but rebel against the status quo,” responds Citizen K. “I’ve already switched jobs and traded in my girlfriend for no-strings sex.”

“Wow!” exclaims Tina. “You move fast.”

“I guess I’m pursuing my freedom.” He takes a swig from his beer bottle. “Or would you call it a midlife crisis?”

“Sure, if you want. I’m a crisis. You’re a crisis. Life’s a crisis. But it’s more important to enjoy life than label it.”

“Or write about it?” Citizen K speculates.

“I don’t really write about anyone’s life,” counters the sci-fi trilogy novelist. “So I can’t help you there.”

“How are the books coming?”

“Well, I started the first volume when I was twenty-two,” says Tina. “Now I’m halfway through the second, I’m having doubts the initial chapters will hold up.”

“I suppose that’s called live and learn,”

“What are you working on right now?” she asks.

“Nothing,” he replies. “I’ve been too busy. About a month ago I submitted a play to a theatre festival, but I haven’t heard yet if it’s been picked.”

“What kind of play?”

“Just a he-said-she-said kitchen sink two-hander. It would be easy to put on.” Then he adds, “I’ll send it to you. You can tell me what you think.”

“Thanks. And good luck. And remember, if Weasely Worsely-Wordster can win a Governor General’s Award, there’s hope for us all.”

“Yeah, he’s some kind of inspiration,” says Citizen K. “And anyone who wants an unread autographed copy of Tumbleweed Kiss can have mine.”

“That makes two up for grabs,” quips Tina. She raises her glass and Citizen K clinks it with his bottle. Their eyes lock.

“Should we do this again?” suggests Citizen K. “My place?”

“Next Monday night,” agrees Tina. When the bill arrives, Tina pays for her own drinks. “This isn’t a relationship,” she declares. “It’s fun. Let’s keep it that way.”

Citizen K is taking advantage of his first day of vacation, sleeping well into the morning. Luxuriating in bed, he relives his precariously hilarious final moments at Well-Max, and fantasizes about last night’s romp with Tina. Eventually, after rising and brewing his wake-up coffee, he turns on his computer. Then in what has become a daily ritual, he visits the theatre company’s website to check the status of his play.

Finally, the list of works to be performed at the festival has been released. Citizen K hastily scans the titles, but his is not included. There are also a number of pieces nominated for honourable mention, but his play hasn’t qualified for that category either. However, in a breezy electronic mail letter, the drama group acknowledges with thanks the receipt of his entry fee, mentions the high quality of all the scripts submitted, and informs him that his play didn’t make the cut. The message goes on to urge Citizen K to volunteer his time assisting with the productions that were selected. Then it ends by soliciting a financial donation and cheerily inviting him to try again next year.

“Do they think I’m crazy?” scoffs Citizen K. He has no intention of helping with the shows that were chosen over his, and his fruitless fifty dollar fee is all the cash he’s willing to flush down the drama troupe’s drain. So he ignores the letter’s self-serving pleas. But as he slouches in his armchair with his coffee mug, tempted to feel sorry for himself, he admits that in a weird sort of way he’s relieved his script wasn’t selected. There’s a curious perfection – and perverse bragging rights – attached to his one hundred percent lifetime rejection record, which has just held intact. Citizen K reflects that his creativity draws motivation from this underdoggedness, and his output would risk the loss of its virgin vim and vinegar if he ever became appreciated for it. How doomed his writing would be if he were to reverse roles from ‘victim of authority’ to ‘authority figure’. And if his play had been staged, it could have been the start of a slow slide down – or up - the slippery slope of respectability.

The seeds of this contrary world view were sown in Citizen K’s psyche long ago. In particular, he remembers visiting the Sistine Chapel in Rome when he was young and impressionable. Gazing at the religious icons peering down from their niches in the ceiling high above, he wondered what sort of super-human leap would be required to join their lofty ranks. As he studied the illustrations further, it occurred to him that the mythic personages appeared fully preoccupied with their imperative Biblical business, and didn’t seem to be looking for company from him or anyone. Nevertheless, Citizen K, in the blossom of youth, was inspired to spring upward with his arm extended, in a feeble human attempt to connect with the patriarchs and angels hovering overhead, and even God himself. Immediately after this leap of faith, he was accosted by a flurry of Catholic attendants who informed him - employing hushed Italian phrases and universal hand signals - that jumping was not allowed, and he would be escorted from the

holy chamber if he did it again. When the commotion surrounding his fall from grace had subsided, and he once more stood staring at the ceiling, the towering figures now seemed to be chastising him with Old Testament bluster, admonishing him to stay on the ground where he belonged.

Citizen K is certain this inhospitable Vatican reception was pivotal in his eventual loss of regard for both human and spiritual authority. He also maintains it was the basis of his fear and loathing for nameless minor officials who impose undue restrictions, as well as his resentment toward big shots in privileged positions who close their ranks to exclude others. As a result of these deeply ingrained biases, Citizen K has a love-hate relationship with his writing. Although composing stories and plays is his most consuming passion, he has no confidence that anyone in the publishing field will ever look at his work or give it a chance. And because of this lack of trust that his efforts will ever be recognized, Citizen K sometimes asks himself why he bothers to write at all. For he constantly remembers Michelangelo's most celebrated tableau in the Sistine Chapel, which vividly depicts how God, the divine tease, will never touch Adam's mortal finger.

But despite his multiple misgivings over the refusal of his play, and the near certainty that his stories will never find an audience, Citizen K is still compelled to create. And on this fresh first morning of a holiday leading to an expanded career path, his hopes and enthusiasm are irrepressible. With a reawakened vitality, Citizen K surveys the haphazard articles he's accumulated, which still lie scattered around his condo - Ellen's insidious baby blue yoga mat, his forsaken edition of Tumbleweed Kiss, the newspaper with his picture and caption bemoaning prime ministers and their taxes, his parking summonses and government ultimatums - as well as the scrap of paper retrieved from his desk. And suddenly inspired by these mementos of his escapades as a quadragenarian, he's reminded of just how much he loves to write. "I guess I'm crazy after all," he laughs aloud, as he fills a garbage bag with the useless clutter, saving only the tattered envelope with its insightful jottings. Typing "Chapter One" at the top of a blank page on his computer screen, Citizen K carefully enters his first sentence from the paper before him, copying word for word. "When life's events seem to belong in a story, embrace the experience, whatever it may be." Then, driven simply by the need for self-expression deep in his soul, Citizen K keeps on writing.

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