HIS EMINENCE

BY CHRIS CONNER

Three Days Out

"She looks a little wobbly today," I warned Chet.

The rugged brown cockroach we shared as a pet had wandered through the drainage opening between our cinder block cells. Chet had somehow affixed a tiny speck of chipped aluminum to the back of the bug with a dot of glue made of oatmeal. The chip would sparkle like glitter if the unceasing fluorescent light hit it just right. This way we would know that this was our cockroach, Bernice, and not just some random insect.

"She might be done soon. Bernice has had a good life. What's it been? Three months since we found her?" asked Chet.

"Sounds about right. Should I put her out of her misery?"

It was the morning of December 9th; Chester "Chet" Panchenko was set to be executed on December 12th.

While we were considering the fate of Bernice, Chet's TV was murmuring at a virtually inaudible level. Just loud enough for him to hear the trivial questions on his game shows. That was all he ever watched. They provided a relaxing way for him to hone his ability to exist both above and amidst our world of competition, consumption, and superficiality. He watched for a couple of hours around lunchtime and for a couple of hours in the evening. We were stuck to traditional television programming schedules as we were not allowed access to the internet or any kind of streaming services.

"Is that same girl still on Jeopardy?" I asked.

"Yeah, Denise," Chet responded in his raspy smoker's voice then cleared his throat. It was hard to tell if he had perpetual postnasal drip or if it was some kind of tic.

We could only hear each other because of the narrow drainage slots at the bottom of the cinder block wall between our taupe painted cells. Our cells were mildewed suspended animation chambers meant to slow time while we travelled aimlessly through space from darkness towards darkness.

“Did they ask you about your last meal or anything?”

“Yeah,” said Chet in his usual disinterested monotone.

“And?”

“Don’t care. I’m more concerned with Bernice…and Denise.” he muttered, this time followed by two staccato coughs.

“Arms to the ceiling stretch. And release. And stretch. Sitting up. Scratching the groin,” said Alphonse Padilla, the pock-marked corrections officer into his walkie.

I always knew what my neighbor was doing because Padilla, our flat-minded C.O., would recount all Chet’s moves with muted excitement. His narration was for some streaming audio feed operated by the church (transcribed into every language) just in case the closed-circuit camera went out or people were unable to watch the broadcast. The Department of Corrections and ChurchTv were always concerned with possible attacks by the Anti-Tech Movement (cleverly referred to as ATM, something about an obsolete machine that dispensed money.) Either way, I never watched ChurchTV. I always thought it was kind of creepy.

When Chet was placed in the Condemned Wing, or death row as people on the outside called it, I had already been there for three or four protracted years. I remember the day they dragged him into the newly empty cell next to mine. I swear the air-pressure changed when they wrestled him into our unit. I instinctively stood when I heard the door at the end of the hall clang open in hopes of seeing something other than the map-like mold patterns on the moist concrete walls in my cell.

You could tell Chet was a user from the lesions and scars on his grizzled zombie face topped with matted black hair. Somehow, he smelled like he had been pulled out of a swamp even though he had been in county jail and courtrooms for months. Just as they opened his cell to him for the first time, he convulsed to his right and bit the C.O. on the left side of his chin, drawing blood. The startled C.O. (who I never saw again – must have quit that day,) screamed and pushed my feral new neighbor to the ground. He and his officer

buddy dragged Chet into his cell and kicked him for a good two or three minutes as he laughed and shouted, “Fuck you and your children!” I remember wondering if they kicked him hard enough to shoot his brain chip out of the bass of his skull.

I mean, he had been through some stuff, some real shit. We never talked too deeply about our crimes, but I got the 411 over time, mostly from news stories on TV after he became what he became. Chet Panchenko had been a welder at NASSCO shipyard in the late 2020s when most companies were transitioning from traditional laborers to full-on automation. His and thousands of other people’s hours were squeezed over the course of six months or so until there were no more hours…for humans at least. He lost his lease and ended up on the street bouncing from homeless encampment to homeless encampment. The media and many of the lucky assholes who still had jobs called the newly unhoused Robo-Rejects. Eventually, and maybe even predictably, Chet developed a nasty drug problem, a bad mix of ketamine, meth, and spinpuff which led to some gnarly shit. He stabbed three people to death while robbing them to support his habit. Pretty sure he threw one guy onto the highway from the Market Street overpass.

“Can I bring you some fresh towels, Your Eminence?” asked Officer Padilla hoping to please Chet but fully expecting to be spurned.

“No thanks, Padilla. Maybe ask Lex,” responded Chet.

“For you, Mr. Mancini?” baggy-eyed Padilla grudgingly asked while shuffling over to my door.

“Yes, please and thank you,” I responded never wanting to miss an opportunity to cash in on Chet’s unexpected privilege.

Two Days Out

Some days, Chet would have bursts of energy like a puppy with a case of the zoomies. Two days before his scheduled execution was one of those days. He would wear his bed sheet like a toga and dance like a traditional belly or hula dancer to music in his head. Then he would jump on his bed and pretend he was surfing, bound off into a dive roll and resume his unrestrained and somehow very focused dancing. (Very dangerous considering our cells were 6' by 9'.) I was only able to get eyes on this phenomenon a few times when he was grooving during my janitorial shift.

I grew up in a secretly Fundamentalist Protestant household, so Chet's disregard for piety and decorum were nuts to me. When I was a kid, we practiced on the down low in basements and garages as ChurchTv began to pave over the more traditional religions. Pastor McGeary, a domineering asshole who I'm sure was cheating on his wife with half the congregation sucked, but somehow, I respected his self-realized authority. I always hated the paranoia and judgment he brought to our church, but I think I understood it. Manipulation was not one of the deadly sins we were taught.

Of course, all the goofballs on our wing who were faithful and watched ChurchTv, which was most of them, mimicked what Chet was doing. There was a thunderous thump across the whole row when he did that surfing thing. Padilla chirped into his walkie calling ham-fisted play-by-play on Chet's bursts of energy.

Random aside; there was something decidedly feminine in the way Chet looked when he toga danced with his long graying brown hair flying in every direction. This led to a little schism in The Church because the last leader was somewhat of a macho douche. Maybe the AI chose Chet in reaction. Nobody really knows.

"Chet, how can you be dancing right now? I know you've talk about id and authenticity and all that, but it's…it's getting close."

"So?" he responded still breathing heavily from his dance session.

“So, an authentic response to the situation might be the opposite of dancing around in your cell in front of millions of worshippers,” I said, hoping I wasn’t coming off as a critical asshole or some kind of heretic. They were always listening.

“Lex, this sounds like you processing your emotions more than trying to figure out mine. Are you ok because I’m fine.”

I drew the largest breath I could. “I don’t know, Chet. There’s something disconcerting to me about your lack of emotion here.”

“I’m glad you’re processing. Look, I’m here until I’m not. Same for you. Same for everyone. There’s really no right or wrong way to do this, which means there should be no expectations, no guilt, no questioning,” Chet said finally slowing his breathing enough to allow a cough followed by a beat of his chest.

“You make it sound simple,” I muttered.

“It is. I mean…it can be,” he said.

Chet had a way of making difficult things sound basic in our very complicated world. It was 2059 and technology had ramped up to the point where there seemed to be a negative correlation between tech and social order. If tech was solving all our problems, why were so many of us still incarcerated? Why were there still so many homeless encampments? Why was the anti-tech movement gaining so much momentum?

Of course, part of the problem was the Brain Chip Act of 2028, the year before I went down. As the push towards an unattainable tech utopia ramped up, the government (known to many as DisMetaZon Industries) decided the only way to monitor criminals and collect data on criminality was to insert brain chips and retinal cameras into every person convicted of a crime. At first, it was just violent offenders, then after they realized how much money they could make from selling the data, they expanded the mandatory brain chip program to people convicted of any infraction at all.

They used our information for everything from market research to sociological studies on the attitudes of inmates. They knew what we saw on our devices and if our heart rates went up relative to what we were watching. They knew how much we exercised and for how long we slept. Conspiracy theorists were convinced this led to an increase in bogus convictions to get more people in the program. Ultimately, this access was too great to limit to just law breakers, so they offered stipends to people to voluntarily get the implants. Predictably this was mostly impoverished folks, many of whom fell into the Robo-Reject category. Marketing firms and the government had more power than ever to monitor and manipulate a large chunk of the underprivileged population.

The Brain Chip surgery was quick, like a pinch in the back of the neck and a poke in your right temple. They warned us not to touch the mosquito bite scars. That warning was enough for me to purposely fiddle with, or at least, scratch the tiny welt on my neck near the base of my skull. From what I understood, the chip recorded audio, video from the retinal cam, and vitals. So, like, they could use it as a kind of a lie detector or E-Meter. What the chip didn't or couldn't record was physical action or abstract thought. The chips didn't influence our thoughts or actions; they merely recorded. When I picked at my scar, I made sure not to do it in front of a mirror. And when I say mirror, I mean a scratched semi-reflective stainless-steel rectangle that's bolted on the wall above a toilet.

"They're going to gather when it's time," I nervously said to Chet when his wheezing slowed down after his dancing.

"Most likely. They'll react, reflect, and move on," he said distracted like a parent speaking to the concerns of a child while simultaneously attending to another household chore.

"I hope they really internalized what you've taught them. I mean, they've been watching you for years now, and…"

Suddenly there was a high-pitched squeal that made my head twist like a concerned dog.

“Damn it, Padilla! We’ve told you that you can’t be watching us on the TV right outside our cells with the sound up. Feedback, man! Turn your sound off. Turn the fucking sound off!”

He let the whining go on for another few seconds, probably just to punish me, then turned off the sound on his TV which was on a plastic crate just outside our cells.

“I’m not watching you; you shit. I am only focused on His Eminence,” Padilla sputtered holding back tears.

After a few head-clearing minutes Chet said to me in a more focused tone, “they are watching all of us,” as the social media religious interpretation sizzled:

“What I’m seeing here is His Eminence reminding us to learn from each other. He’s been saying things like this for years. Don’t forget to like and subscribe.”

“Another brilliant brilliant lesson from His Eminence Chester the First! Time moves on and we are all subject to the impermanence of life. #Chet1forUS”

“Did you see what HEC1 just did with his right hand? I think it had something to do with the Tech Resistance! I swear he supports the Resistance! He made the hand gesture. What do you all think?”

“His Eminence is not concerned with death. Why else would someone exhibit such glee in his final days. I hope nobody got hurt communing those

moves! LOL! But, seriously folks! Live for the now! And take it easy in the comments!"

"A killer, a religious icon, an addict, a philosopher. How we will view His Eminence after he has gone is not certain."

One Day Out

Chet's flock had arrived. There were seventy-five or eighty thousand people just outside the fences of the prison watching ChurchTv on their phones trying their best to respond to his final full day on Earth. Even as the collective pulse strengthened, Chet remained silent and still. Padilla gripped his walkie with his sweaty little hand while he nervously stood outside our cells watching Chet. The other guys on the row were glued to ChurchTv to respond to Chet's words and actions while they still could. I turned the channel to GovernmentDroneTelevision, or GoDroVis, to get a glimpse of the local drone feed of the gathering outside the razor-wired electrified fence of the prison. The swarm was kind of scary. I always thought our facility was pretty secure until I saw what it looked like on TV surrounded by tens of thousands of mindless worshippers. Concrete, razor wire, and electric fences looked like Lincoln Logs and Legos compared to that mass of humanity.

Religious interpreters had agreed ChurchTv was about bettering community through bettering oneself. Everyone out there wanted to squeeze all they could out of the Chester the First experiment. Chet had really stumbled into a shitload of power for someone who only had a day left to live. I anxiously scratched my chip scar fretting about this realization. My fingernail seemed to catch the end of the chip. I realized I could have pulled the thing out if I wanted.

Padilla walked over to my bars and instructed me that we had to do a quick walkthrough of the procession for Chet's execution. My cell door rattled opened to the sight of three other C.O.s I had never seen before breathing heavily in their army green jumpsuits and stumbling into an improvised processional formation. Padilla handed his miniature black broadcast microphone to the shortest of the three C.O.s and told him to stand in front of Chet's cell and dictate words and actions while we rehearsed. He then grabbed us by the bicep one by one and put us in a processional two-by-two formation with an imaginary Chet between the two guards in front and Padilla and me following.

"Now we proceed to the chamber," announced Padilla in his familiar droopy tone. "And left and right and left," he continued.

Was this really something that needed rehearsal? I wondered. Maybe it was for the vacant husks I was surrounded by, but come on. In my rounds as unit sanitation specialist, I was always focused on my tasks or distracted by the programmed ChurchTv talk droning on from almost every cell. This procession, however, slowed things to the point where I recognized how dark our wing felt even though the corridor was painted tan. The often-flickering neon lights didn't change the cave-like nature of death row. The only true light was where we were headed. Somehow it angered me that we had trudged up and down the hall for seemingly no purpose.

"Hey Chet," I began, after I had been locked in again.

"What's up, Lex?" said Chet followed by a swell of sound repeating what he had just said in an unsettling overlap. The crowd began repeating his words before he could even finish a sentence.

"You have to be careful what you say and do in the next twenty-four hours, or people outside could get hurt. Imagine if you started screaming and swinging your fists right now, I mean…maybe don't imagine. But you get what I mean. It was hard to tell from the drone footage I saw what kind of crowd control they have out there."

"And stand…standing up. Taking a deep breath. Face in hands…face in hands. Arms to the side chest out," stammered Padilla into the walkie as he tried to hold in his tears.

"We," said Chet in the clearest voice he could pausing between each word to let followers outside and, in the prison, repeat his words one by one with clarity. Thankfully, Padilla repeated Chet's words into his walkie talkie in a whisper.

"are…symbiotes…who…live…"

He rested for what seemed like a minute but was probably only twenty seconds.

"and… **die**…ephemera…like…all…things…"

As the roar of the crowd finished the word "things," I realized the hair was standing up on the back of my neck. Chet had just directly addressed his followers for the first time

in eleven years. I'm told he looked directly into the ChurchTv camera. He must have planned it. Holy shit. He planned it.

"R...S...T...L...N...E"

He chose the letters of his final play. Huh? What followed was the sound of a pod of harpooned whales sloppily repeating the letters. The crowd was crying. Howling. For five minutes this otherworldly hum continued. His end was an opening play.

Chet never spoke again. This had been both his only sermon and his last words. Words to be scattered across the internet subject to ridiculous interpretation.

"*RSTLNE! Resist, So, They, Lose, Now, Eternally! This is the proper reading. We need to resist the 'bots, y'all! Let's get back to work! Human work! Please subscribe and like for notifications and updates!* "

"I solved it, kids! We all know HEC1 loved Wheel of Fortune! OBVS! Anyhoo, the next play is often buying a vowel! So...buy a 'U'. Buy U! Bayou!!!! The Holy Land is Louisianna!!!! That's where we can find peace and live the way of HEC1!!!"

"It's your girl again, back on the CheTerpretations! You all know what RSTLNE means. Say it fast like I do. RSTLNE...Wrestlin'! I'm definitely going to be tuning into WrestleMania 172 next week to find more nuggets!!! Get on the live feed, and we'll dig in together!!!!"

When I met him, he was still angry at the world. Snarling. He used to rant for hours about how he was a victim of the system and how he was targeted and how the guys he killed would have killed him if he hadn't struck first. When the C.O.s would tell him to quiet down, he would curse them with the most acid language you've ever heard.

He mellowed, though. It took a few years, but he did. Bit by bit. Organically. Maybe it was just the time, or maybe it was his recognition of the pointlessness of anger in our situation. It wasn't going to do him any good. Peaceful resignation.

He read everything they would give him. He had stacks of books on all subjects, but it was usually the books on ancient Eastern religion and philosophy that he liked the most. Over the years he would let little pieces of his life story slip. He grew up mostly with his mother until protective services took him away and put him into foster care. He was never really able to settle in one place, so he never had close friends. He told me a story about how some bully made fun of his coughing tick, so he tried to strangle the kid with his padded bookbag straps.

By the time ChurchTv needed a new Eminence, Chet had truly evolved. He understood the importance of just being. No aspiration, no desire, and no ego. I think it took having gone through what he went through to get to this point. The trauma he endured led him to some kind of wisdom. Only someone who experienced the torture of his childhood followed by the injustice and chaos of his adulthood could get to the insight he had. His wisdom was born in his pain, his rage, his shame, his self-hatred, and ultimately his clarity.

When His Eminence Frankford the Second died, Chet fit the bill. The ChurchTv algorithm identified the population as being dangerously self-centered and pride driven at the end of Frankford's reign. He probably lived too long as his model for being was based on an outdated condition caused by a dip in productivity and listlessness from early waves of automation. People were still working, but automation was making them feel unneeded. Frankford was a duplicitous swindler and a self-promoter who taught people to act out of

ego and self-interest. Before he became Eminence, he made his money in online marketing and hustling various wellness supplements. ChurchTv was kind of hilarious when Frankford was still around. He had some lackey chasing him around with a camera all the time. Sometimes HEF2, wearing only a bathrobe and loafers, would intentionally ditch the camera guy (often to seek prostitutes) leaving millions of followers in a panic. Social media would blow up. Like, literally, platforms would crash. A few times the Anti-Tech folks replaced the ChurchTv feed with a deep fake feed of Frankford doing stupid shit like making out with an orangutan. Anyhoo, after thirteen years of Frankford, society had become more thoughtless and actually kind of mean.

Chet, like every Eminence before him, was chosen to become the most powerful cleric in the world by the ChurchTv Algorithm Personality Survey. Every single person with chips or public digital profiles were assessed. The person who was the closest match to the desired ChurchTv profile was chosen. The shit happened in a flash. One day, Chet was just another schmuck on the row waiting to be zapped into oblivion, and the next day he was His Eminence Chester the First!

Within a day, ChurchTv administrators along with the tech folks from The Department of Corrections, set up a camera focused on Chet's cell so followers could monitor him 24/7. They also brought in lackey C.O.s like Padilla who were trained to narrate Chet's actions and relay his words in case of an Anti-Tech hack or catastrophic system failure. I don't know where they found these people. It was hard to tell if Padilla was an agent of the church who was later certified as a corrections officer, or a regular C.O. who happened to be a follower. Either way, he was an empty man.

Administrators from ChurchTv told Chet very little. There was no foundational religious text. No rituals. No expectations really. It was up to each Eminence to decide how they wanted to wield their influence over their massive congregation. One of the brief introductory meetings they held with him was during Wheel of Fortune so there's no way the newly anointed HEC1heard anything they told him. I remember him periodically turning

up the volume while clean-shaven, business-suit-wearing men were going through church history and protocol with him.

Chet became the most passive religious leader in history. Some people thought it was a waste of influence. I mean, more than some people. He never addressed the camera directly and never talked about his position. Parishioners could only watch, listen, imitate, and interpret. Officials, visitors, and corrections officers were often star struck, but Chet never leaned into or acknowledged his privilege and power.

Zero Day

I heard the other guys in The Condemned Wing bumping around all night going to the bathroom and shuffling in their cells. No one was talking but, I'm sure the true believers were all feeling knots in the pits of their stomachs like I was. They were losing their Chosen One.

Midnight crawled by, and surreally, we were in the final day, only hours away from the end of my friend, Chet, His Eminence Chester the First. There were no game shows available in the middle of the night, so Chet's cell was silent. We were trapped in time by the painted cinder blocks and relentless fluorescent lighting. Somehow, Padilla pulled a never-ending shift and, although he looked pale, disheveled, and completely exhausted, he stood at attention ready to report on Chet's words or actions. There were none. The last thing I heard Padilla say into his ChurchTv issued walkie before the 6:00AM scheduled execution was, "still sitting upright on the bed with his back against the wall." I stopped checking GovernmentTelevision, so I can't say for sure, but I assume the horde outside the prison was dozing off in shifts hoping to be alert for HEC1's final moments. They could see on the ChurchTv broadcast he wasn't speaking or moving. He had established a waking trance to get him across the finish line.

At 5:28AM, the lights flickered, then went out for a minute or so. I thought they were giving Old Sparky a test run to make sure there were no mistakes, especially with an execution as scrutinized as this one. We could hear a collective gasp as the congregation throng outside must have seen the lights go out and thought they missed Chet's final moment. The second the lights came back on, I remember scratching my chip scar at the same moment Chet cleared his throat. We were in sync, I thought. We were together at that moment. Padilla nervously reported nothing was wrong and everything was on track for the 6:00AM electric chair charge.

The execution was set to be quick and simple. The only special request made by the ChurchTv executive board was that Chet's face not be covered so his spirit would not be hindered from finding the next Eminence. The state, the church, and the Department of

Corrections agreed that no camera would be allowed in the execution chamber, so the final ChurchTv broadcast of HEC1 was supposed to be him walking to the execution chamber at the end of the hall.

At 5:45AM I heard the impenetrable metal door at the end of the hall unlocked and the sound of two corrections officers walking almost in sync. I don't think I ever noticed the echo on the row as much as I did in those nervous seconds. Chet must have heard the officers as well, because he was ready when they finally got to his cell. No verbal instructions were heard. I as next to Padilla in the dead-man-walking procession to the other end of the hall towards the execution chamber just as we rehearsed. The utility closet was on the left just before the entrance to the room with the electric chair.

"And left and right and left and right…" whispered Padilla as we fell into lockstep on Chet's final walk. I only saw Chet's face for a second before he turned with the corrections officers. Composed. I found out later that because he took a left turn, then started walking, the flock of worshippers outside of the prison started circling the prison clockwise like a backwards Tawaf. My head was pounding and I was trying to contain my own emotions, so I couldn't hear anything outside, just the echoing footsteps of our convoy.

When we got to the end of the hall, the two stone-faced, sunglasses-wearing, execution officers proceeded into the radiant execution chamber and shut the door behind them leaving the ever-mumbling Padilla and me outside. While they strapped Chet into the electric chair with hefty leather belts, I deftly opened the cleaning closet and got my mop, wipes, bags, and other cleaning agents. I hurried back and peered through the twelve-inch by twelve-inch window in the door with my head pushing against Padilla's. Protocol was for inmates to never be this close to corrections officers, but Padilla, a true believer, was caught in the moment and didn't seem to mind me jockeying for a good view with him. I hadn't thought about watching the execution beforehand, but I guess I was on macabre autopilot.

As the twin death cops walked across the room to the electric chair switches, a collective shout could be heard. At first, I heard a booming "whoa!" from the followers on

the row. Then you could hear, and I swear, feel, the rumble from the now stationary mass of followers outside the prison. I thought people were yelling because they were reacting to the impending fatal electric shock, but that's not what it was. The C.O.s switched the small levers at the same time so they would never know which of them was directly responsible for the execution.

Chet shook and turned his head towards the door I was peering through. Padilla had passed out the second they started the execution and was slumped on the ground. Chet's blank expression never changed in the fifteen or twenty seconds it took to sizzle his life away. The crowd outside and the inmates on the row shrieked as soon as the switches flipped. As the life was charged out of Chet's body, I heard some unexpected reactions from the followers in my unit.

"It's a miracle!"

"Chester is lord!"

"We can see!"

"Mancini!"

Not knowing what the other death row convicts were talking about, especially why someone called out my name, I quickly went about my business. The two C.O.s in the chamber with Chet, checked his pulse, opened the door and walked past us unphased and anonymously. I was still shaking, but I intended to mop up around the throne where HEC1 had been executed and get the hell out of there. I dutifully mopped and broomed around the electric chair and the horribly still corpse of my mate. When I saw his brain chip in a small pool of blood on the gray tiled floor next to the chair, I instinctively pretended I dropped my disinfectant spray. I was lucid enough to kneel down and pick up the brain chip that was jolted from the base of Chet's skull.

A few minutes later, after a replacement corrections officer had come to relieve fainting Padilla, I put my supplies back in the closet and held on very tightly to the tiny,

blessed brain chip I had found. As I walked past the cells of Chet's former followers, their eyes were stunned open and teary.

"It's you."

"Lex, you're next."

"Save us, Mancini."

The next day Padilla returned to his post. He stood outside my cell looking at me for a long time. I thought he was going to cry.

"Mr. Mancini, may I enter your cell?" asked Padilla.

I couldn't figure out why he was asking me to do something. He was the law, not me.

"May I show you something, Mr. Mancini?" he continued.

"Yeah, come on in. I don't mind. We've all been through a lot. Are you ok? I mean, did you knock your head or something?"

Padilla unlocked my cell and walked in leaving the door open.

"I'm ok Mr. Mancini. No damage. Can I turn on your TV, so you can see something?"

"Ok, I'm a little concerned the way you're acting, though," I said not understanding the abrupt change of tone from someone who seemed to think very little of me for years.

My slumped overseer walked to my antiquated tv and turned it to ChurchTV. He stood next to the tv, out of the way so I could see, and looked at me attempting to gauge my reaction. They were re-airing the execution over and over. The first shot was the motion sensing camera that had monitored Chet for years. It followed us walking down the hall away from the cell. It was stationary, so all you could see was us shrinking into the distance. You couldn't see much, but you could make out some murky figures and a bright light when the corrections officers opened the door to the execution chamber. A few stagnant seconds followed. Then, suddenly the screen went black. In the few seconds the

screen was dark, I fully expected a resumption of the last shot. Shockingly, the next image was of me staring through the door at Chet as he died.

I was the final image burned into the collective memory of the entire global ChurchTv congregation. My stupid gawking face looking through a little window into an execution chamber.

"Padilla!," I nervously screamed. "What the hell? What the fucking hell? How did this-"

"If I might, Mr. Mancini," Padilla interrupted with the deference a butler would have for the lord of the manor. "The Anti-tech Movement hacked into the retinal camera of His Eminence. The final seconds of the Chester the First ChurchTV broadcast were images seen through his very eyes. He was looking at you. His official broadcast ended with an image of your face."

> *"WOW! We know HEC1s was looking at his neighbor Lex Mancini in his final moments. It must be a sign. At the very least, Mancini is blessed. What are your thoughts? Leave them in the comments?"*
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> *"Lex Mancini, folks! His Eminence wanted us to see Lex Mancini! Now we're going to have to go back into the archives to see if he said some important shit to his boy in the last few months. Smash that like button, subscribe, and we'll be back when the next Eminence is anointed!"*
>
> *"If only L-Man had the correct BRAINCHIP to be anointed by the ChurchTV algorithm! BOOM!"*

After Padilla shuffled out of my cell, I stood paralyzed for a minute. I nearly collapsed due to the tension in my knees and chest and a sudden wave of nausea. The only

thing that pulled me out of my anxiety trance was a waddling brown smudge with a sparkle I saw in in my periphery. Bernice! Bernice! I kneeled down to see my old friend, and in a godlike act of mercy, I impaled her with Chet's brain chip. No one would find the chip in an insect carcass. As I stood up holding my pet cockroach while considering where I should hide her, I caught a glimpse of myself smiling in my scratched stainless-steel mirror.