

Bring Me a Dream

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Mr. Sandman, bring me a dream

Make him the cutest that I've ever seen

Give him two lips like roses and clover

Then tell him that his lonesome nights are over

The music stopped, and a message in front of Sue read: "Verdict: 9-0. The jury finds you liable for damage to a City fire hydrant in the amount of \$1,000."

"Appeal," Sue answered, mechanically. The music resumed.

Mr. Sandman, bring us a dream

Give him a pair of eyes with a "come-hither" gleam

Give him a lonely heart like Pagliacci

And lots of wavy hair like Liberace . . .

"Appeal denied. Appellant is liable for compensatory damages totaling \$1,000."

"Play jury comments."

Their avatars populated the virtual courtroom one by one, in the shadow of an awkwardly large American flag. Behind them perched pixelated paintings of anonymous people in robes underneath a heading reading “Legal Eagles.”

“Defendant was not credible,” one juror announced.

“Based on Defendant’s Permanent Record, she just seemed like the type of person who would run into that fire hydrant.”

“I found the City’s witness testimony compelling.”

The City had sued Sue after she refused to pay for the damage to a fire hydrant. According to Sue, she had been fast asleep across the street when a car struck the hydrant just past midnight a couple months back. But unfortunately for Sue, her ancient 2025 Honda Civic was clumsily parked near the hydrant, one wheel up on the curb. To make matters worse, her neighbor, Karen, had testified against her, tearfully recounting the horror of having her family’s basement entertainment system flooded.

“Exit Courtroom,” Sue grumbled.

“Thank you for choosing the DRAB JusticeCenter. We look forward to helping resolve your next legal matter.”

I didn't have a choice, Sue thought, frustration mounting. She removed her goggles, unleashing a colorful barrage of expletives into the silent house. This startled Jerry, who was similarly goggled across the room in his recliner.

"I'm guessing it didn't go so well?"

"No."

"And the appeal?"

"Same."

"Ah well. Could be worse. You could be that busted up fire hydrant!" He chuckled. Jerry always laughed at his own jokes, most of which were not funny.

"I didn't do it. You know I didn't."

Jerry sighed. "Well *you* know the DRAB system is like, optimized for justice, right? If it says you did it, then ya did. Period. Full stop!"

"That's Baloney." (Baloney was a mechanically-created mixture of meat from the gastrointestinal tracts of cows and pigs. Long ago, humans had consumed it for sustenance).

As if Sue was a third grader, Jerry explained: “Everybody has to play by the rules, Suzy. The DRAB Appeals Algorithm doesn’t get it wrong.” He snapped on his goggles. “Anyways, I’ve gotta get back to it. Murder trial today!”

DRAB was short for “Dispute Resolution for Advanced Bureaucracies.” It was a virtual reality platform that most governments used to handle legal matters. DRAB began as a spinoff of an online retail company, which used the platform to resolve contract and fraud disputes between shoppers. Judicial branches eventually caught wind and started procuring it for themselves.

Most judges loved DRAB because it made being a judge less stressful. It took all the work out of managing the minutiae of hearings and trials. Even better, the DRAB Appeals Algorithm automatically decided appeals. Analyzing the evidence, trial record, and the parties’ Permanent Records, DRAB generated opinions and orders that simply required the judges’ final signatures. (A Permanent Record was kept for each citizen in the DRAB database. It tracked their criminal history, credit history, location history, employment history, spending and investment history, speech history, behavioral web surfing data, biometric data, genetic data, and Citizen Score. Children were taught about the Permanent Record when they were young so that they would not misbehave).

Computing the math, Sue's heart sank. The \$1,000 judgment against her was too little for insurance to cover, but it was more than she had in her bank account. Garnished wages, it was, then.

"Everybody has to play by the rules," Sue thought she heard Jerry mumble again to himself between bites of Flamin' Hot Doritos. "Ugh," Sue mumbled back, to deaf ears.

Jerry was a proud member of DRAB's Citizen Online Governance program—COG for short—in which citizens participated in virtual jury duty. A predictive algorithm assigned the "COGs" to cases based on their Permanent Records, automating the traditional *voir dire* process for selecting jurors. COGs could sit on juries as they pleased in exchange for increases in their Citizen Scores. Jerry, it turned out, was a Platinum-Level COG. Because he had reached a 365-day streak of sitting on juries, he could now participate in high-profile cases like felonies. Jerry loved his felonies.

To take her mind off the exploding fire hydrant, Sue decided to clean Jerry's room. While she trudged away, Jerry wore an innocent, tiny grin, as if peacefully dreaming.

The room was more landfill than bedroom since Jerry slept on his recliner now. Doritos wrappers, carryout boxes with bits of rice in them, coffee-stained mugs, sweat-stained socks and T-shirts, and a nose-piercing rotten cheese stench greeted her at the door. Sue waded through the flood to his bed.

She couldn't help but glance at the bedside table. Peering ruefully up at her were a framed photograph and a book (both oddities, nowadays). The photograph depicted a gleaming Sue and Jerry. Jerry had his beard then, too, but it was trimmed and well kempt. The picture was from their honeymoon, during which Sue remembered being happy. Next to the frame was a book titled *Powerless No Longer: Reprogramming Your Addictive Behavior*, by Peter W. Soderman.

She had rummaged the items out of an old box, placing them suggestively on Jerry's bedside table. His current infatuation with being a COG reminded her of the days when Jerry had been addicted to buying lottery tickets and playing virtual blackjack.

Only thing was, Sue could not escape the inhibition that COG had saved Jerry from those addictions. After all, he was contributing to society—a fact of which she was reminded each time they spoke. She could hear him clearly in her head: "I've found my calling, Suzy. And I've made friends doing it, too. I feel like I'm doing something meaningful for once."

But on the other hand, Sue thought Jerry never really had a choice. DRAB had lured Jerry in with targeted advertisements based on his Permanent Record. It had played to his insecurities stemming from his gambling addiction, offering him the chance to "renew" himself. He now spent more on "Swag Suits" for his juror avatar than he ever had on blackjack. From what Sue could tell, Jerry and a cadre of fellow COGs had even begun betting on cases. When he wasn't

in the JusticeCenter, he was absent and melancholy. This all made life outside the goggles quite difficult for Sue. And she was bitter.

As if on-queue, her device buzzed violently, notifying her of another referral request from Jerry: “At DRAB, we’re automating boring stuff and making jury duty fun again! Come join the party today and get a five-point increase in your Citizen Score,” the ad read.

Tossing her device into the flood of garbage, Sue burst into tears. She caressed the photograph and curled up into a ball on the tidy bed.

Here she was, vacillating again, drifting between alternate realities. Maybe this was *her* fault, not the stupid computer program’s. Maybe Jerry was only addicted to being a COG because he lacked connection to the real world, to her. After all, she worked two jobs, and they spoke only about once every two days. Yet many people had told Sue that it was not her fault. So maybe it was Jerry’s fault. Jerry had made many choices that contributed to this unenviable state of affairs. But that didn’t seem right, either. At the end of the day, Jerry was just another human being. As usual, she landed on the unsatisfying conclusion that it was no one’s fault and everyone’s at the same time. Part of Sue still felt sorry for Jerry. But mostly she felt numb and exhausted.

After brooding awhile longer in the dark, she donned her goggles once again.

Through puffy eyes, Sue gazed over the slogan emblazoned across the top of the JusticeCenter site: “Automating Justice.”

As usual she was greeted by an advertisement. DRAB’s hoodie-clad founder appeared. “Here at the DRAB JusticeCenter, our mission is to . . .”

“Skip.”

“Thank you for choosing the DRAB JusticeCenter.”

I didn’t have a choice, she thought. “Institute civil action.”

Scrolling, she eventually found what she was looking for. She pointed at the “Divorce” icon.

“Please hold.”

Sandman, I'm so alone

Don't have nobody to call my own

Please turn on your magic beam

Mr. Sandman, bring me a dream