

THE
LAST FREE
MAN

a novel

ZUBIN J. SHROFF



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THE LAST FREE MAN: A NOVEL

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**THE
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I

“I can’t believe you’re not on SpaceHook yet,” she said to me as I wrote down her phone number on my hand even as I memorized it because I am a compulsive hand-washer. “Everyone’s on SpaceHook. Is this some kind of a ‘oh-lookie-I’m-so-cool-and-different-because-I’m-not-on-SpaceHook-and-you’re-a-loser-who-can’t-live-without-the-social-network’ thing? Because if it is, we are going to have problems.”

“No,” I said to her. “I just haven’t thought about it much. And I think you’re overreacting to me writing down your number on my hand. I left my cell phone in the cab. So if anything, I’m the loser here.”

“You’re not a loser,” she said, completely missing the pun on “loser” (as in I had lost my cell phone). “I had fun today. We should hang out again.”

But I knew I'd never see her again. She gave me a look that said exactly that. And nobody says, "You're not a loser" unless they think you're a loser. At least she was sweet enough to pretend so that the walk from the park to the subway station wouldn't be awkward. Not that we needed to walk to the subway station together. I was going to take a cab anyway, and it was broad daylight on a crowded street. But I'm a sweet guy.

Gregory Hidalgo Merchant is my name. I live in New York City, and I'm thirty-three. I do have parents, but they warned me not to write about them, so I'm leaving them out. And full disclosure: this account was first published on SpaceHook, which means you kind of already know how one part of this story ends.

Freedom is a funny thing. Other people have written about it, and still other people have ranted about it. I intend to do neither, despite the title of this account. But that's enough of the cryptic innuendos and what-not. Let's get to the meat of it.

You all know SpaceHook. It's that website that gives you your own "space" online, and you create a profile and "hook" into the profiles of other "spacers." (I think some people still say "SpaceHookers," but this is not a science fiction porno story, so we'll leave that one alone.) Anyway, so you take your space and hook it into the spaces of others, and it becomes this massive network of hooked profiles and spaced-out stuff that gives rise to all kinds of newish social phenomena based on the mathematics of exponential expansion and the science of complexity.

And I was outside of this space. No hooks, no ladders, no profiles, no nothing. Not that I was a rebel or anything dramatic like that. I thought SpaceHook was a fine enough thing. I was not the lone crusader who fought “big brother” and won or even died trying. I didn’t try. I had no reason to.

I just hadn’t thought about it enough. And when the mathematics of exponential expansion crept up on me, I suddenly found myself as the last man on earth who wasn’t a spacer, and as predicted by the science of complexity, this took me to places that no sweet thirty-three-year-old should ever have to go.

2

I was always a fairly social guy, and so SpaceHook would have been a natural fit for me if not for my job. I ran a few call centers out in Jersey, and the number one rule of a call center like ours in which employees have access to sensitive customer data is this: no personal electronics. No cell phones, no tablets, no music players, no electronic shavers, no mechanical pencils. There should be no way for an employee to exit my building with any information besides what they're supposed to be picking up for dinner (or breakfast, depending on the shift).

In the early days (like three or four years ago) when I was just building up my call center business, I spent all my time in these windowless warehouses, and so I followed these very same rules. One might think that being cut off from

the world for hours on end would have made me even more enthusiastic about messing with social networks and other connective-type stuff in my free time, but it somehow just didn't play out that way for me. Like I said, I was a fairly social guy, and so my free time was spent . . . socializing.

I went to bars and restaurants and clubs and shows and galleries and museums with friends and lovers and business associates and family members and friends of family members and family members of friends and friendly ex-lovers and business-like current lovers. It was all good and fun, and I was good and responsive and kept in touch regularly.

Soon enough though, people started asking me that question that the sweet girl had asked me. To be fair, it started off with "Are you on SpaceHook?" but then quickly progressed to "Why aren't you on SpaceHook?" and eventually escalated to "Why the f*** aren't you on SpaceHook? Who the f*** do you think you are? You goddamn piece of s***."

And I promise you, at several times throughout this geometric progression, I sincerely planned to join SpaceHook so I could be a good friend and not a goddamn piece of s***. But I got busy. My call center business took off once people started making a big deal about call center work being done in India. (And so I just hired a bunch of Indians to work from my Jersey buildings, thereby taking away just as many American jobs while my clients bumped up their service surcharges to account for the higher wages we had to pay the Indians (costs of applying for work permits and bringing them over from Bangalore and settling them into Edison and Jersey City).) And then, when I was pretty close to

actually setting aside the time to sign up on SpaceHook and put up some pictures of my animals (just fish actually, and they're all dead now anyway), I got the call.

They acted like I had won the lottery or sweepstakes or something, but also like I was the Unabomber, and so it was a confusing conversation at best.

"Mister, um, Hidalgo," came the robotic female voice.

"Merchant," I said.

"Sorry?"

"Merchant. Mister Merchant. Hidalgo is my middle name."

"Oh, okay. I thought Merchant was a listing of your job or something. Sorry about that. How are you today?"

"Fine."

"Sir, where are you located? My records show a residence in Manhattan and a work address in New Jersey. Is that right?" She acted like it couldn't possibly be right. She was probably thinking Kentucky or Montana, but I didn't know it then.

Of course, I neither confirmed nor denied any of that. I ran a call center, for god's sake. We had training sessions on how to extract information from people without giving any away. Little Miss Robot-voice was not going to Hidalgo me that easily.

"And where are *you* located?" I said smugly.

"In Boston, sir," she replied cheerfully.

New England has always scared me with its weird accents and the mystique of Bill Belichick, the head coach of the New England Patriots (and now the secret leader of the allied forces, I believe). So this did not impress me, and it certainly did not put me at ease. If anything, I wondered if she was a Unabomber herself.

"Are you going to kill me?" I asked.

She laughed at this, but the laugh was in no way proof that she was not a robot and not a Unabomber. So I just waited for her to explain herself.

“Mr. Hid—I mean Merchant,” she said, “I’m sorry. I work for the Boston Globular.”

“You mean the Boston Globe,” I said.

“No, sir,” she said.

Now I wanted to laugh. She probably worked for Belichick himself, and this was an attempt to confuse me with funny Bush-era words to get my defenses down before he forced a fumble and embarrassed me on live television.

“Come on. Who do you work for?”

She cleared her throat. “The Boston Globular. We are a global e-zine based in Boston, and we cover global social phenomena and also local sports.”

“You know that something is globular when it resembles a glob,” I said, and immediately I felt like an obnoxious piece of s***.

“Yes, sir. It’s a pun.”

“Of course it is. I forgot that New England has a different sense of humor.”

I think she wasn’t sure whether I was joking or not, and so she laughed briefly and politely, which is a pretty good thing to do when you’re not sure whether to laugh or not. I tell this to my new call center people. She was okay, I guess.

“Anyway,” she said, “we’d like to present you with an e-award and feature you in an e-interview that will be published on the Boston Globular next month. Next month, as you know, has been named Social Networking Month in the United States, and so we thought it would be fun to have you on our front page. You know, like a pun.”

Now I was really confused, but this New England sense of humor was growing on me, and besides, I also thought Belichick was a good coach. Still, I had to address my confusion first, because this Boston lady wasn't helping.

"Help me out here," I said patiently.

"Sir?"

"I mean, tell me how all those things you just said could possibly make any sense."

"Oh. Well, sir, Mister Merchant, according to our researchers, you, sir, Mister Merchant, are the only person in the United States without an active SpaceHook account."

"Sorry, what?"

She started to repeat herself, but I stopped her. I had heard the words just fine, and I told her to be quiet for a minute or so.

"That's not possible," I said finally.

"Sir, our research is built on US Census data, federal personal surveillance information, and SpaceHook's own internal user database."

"What about my parents?" I said frantically. "There's no way they're . . . users." The thought of calling my parents spacers freaked me out a bit.

"Sir. It's just you. You are the last one left."

"Give me a minute," I snapped. "Just let me think."

I thought for a while, but there wasn't really that much to think about. My initial panic had been unfounded, I realized. Just like the feeling of everyone looking at you if you're the only guy on the dancefloor. No big deal. Just get up there and express yourself.

"All right, great," I said. "I'll do it."

3

I expected the *Boston Globular* to be a crappy little office filled with beanbags and round paper lanterns, but it was quite nice and sensible with very few fire-hazards or posture-threats. They had offered to fly me up, but I took the train, which they paid for even though it was twice as expensive as the shuttle from LaGuardia and took three times as much time. A well-dressed woman greeted me at the door and led me through the aisles towards a corner office. The Globular employees looked at me in awe and disgust, and I felt good and dirty about it.

When she finally spoke, I recognized her voice as the one on the phone. She looked and acted nothing like a robot, and I was actually quite taken by her animated mannerisms and quaint New England puns (or whatever they seemed to think were puns up there). She was very professional and direct,

and I got no sense of being judged for who I was (not that I thought I was who I seemed to be becoming). After some simple background questions and factual inquiries about my reasons for not joining the rest of the United States of SpaceHook, she got to the one question that made me squirm.

“So,” she said, “Mister Merchant, how does it feel to be the last unconnected human being in the United States of America?”

Feel? Unconnected? United? How the hell should I know? I hadn’t thought about it. I didn’t care. I was about to join SpaceHook right before Robot-voice called me, and I had told her that in the interview. I wasn’t trying to make a statement, and I didn’t know how it felt. It felt no different than squeezing a lemon or petting a fish or peeing next to a lion-tamer or setting fire to a barge on the Hudson River or crying in your sleep or—

“It feels . . . free,” I said. “It feels free.”

And so hit the headline:

LAST FREE MAN IN AMERICA.

4

Perhaps things would have turned out different if I had checked out the *Boston Globular's* website beforehand. I should have known that any Boston-based publication that uses the word Globular as a pun is basically a Libertarian rag so radical that even New Hampshire people who lived in the woods (and who were all apparently on SpaceHook now, by the way) didn't use their regular e-mail addresses for the mailing list.

The interview had been edited with extreme prejudice, and all the parts about me having nothing against SpaceHook and in fact being impressed by how widespread its use had become had been left out. My spiel about the "Network Effect" and how SpaceHook's value to its users increases as more users sign up was cut. And my quip about being lucky

to get this award at the time I did because I would very likely be opening my own SpaceHook account over the coming weeks was not only dropped but in fact rewritten to say the exact opposite. Yes.

INTERVIEWER: *Hidalgo, do you think you will ever sign up on SpaceHook?*

HIDALGO: *No, never. No.*

Yes. Hidalgo. And so I became Hidalgo, the Last Free Man, the last holdout against something that actually seemed quite fun and useful and, despite vague parallels to all those old stories about “compooters” taking over our lives and turning us into emoticons, was not evil in any sense of the word. I was serious about the Network Effect, and I fully understood that being on SpaceHook possibly enhanced a person’s freedom as much as limited it.

As I closed down my laptop and went in to work, I figured I’d just end it by signing up on SpaceHook and simply hooking into the *Boston Globular* fan site itself, so all those lap-dog libs (hey, I’m a New Yorker, but those New England punsters are something else. Globular. Jeez) would see that it was over. If there was no one free, then we’re all free, right?

But I had underestimated the power of some publicity that makes it look like someone is fighting “the man.” After all, even though USA has not been considered the underdog in anything (besides men’s soccer) since the mid 1700s, the ethos of the country is and will always be one that holds the outgunned, outnumbered lone hero in the highest re-

gard. The one against the all. The small guy peeing on the big guy's foot and then flipping off the big guy.

And so they cheered for me, my people did. Everyone from my new Indian recruits to the seasoned veterans who now had green cards or US passports to the handful of non-Indians who worked for me so I could fill out some of those pesky Human Resources forms without getting sued by some New England-based agency. They cheered and they clapped, and I could swear I heard a few of them whisper into their headsets that Hidalgo had just walked past them.

“Okay, that’s enough,” I said, but of course I couldn’t help but smile. After all, when you’re out there dancing on your own and people say your moves are awesome, well, it feels awesome. Perhaps I could stay on that dancefloor a bit longer.

Perhaps Hidalgo will go for one more song, I thought as I headed to my unconnected, windowless, transparent cubicle overlooking my adoring hordes. Just one song.

5

That next song came up quick, and I was ready.

The message was waiting for me when I got home. Finally, a New York publication. I called them back and put on my deep, carefree Hidalgo voice.

“The New York Times?” I confirmed.

“The New York Mimes,” was the reply. “Is this Hidalgo?”
Good lord.

“Why are you speaking?” I asked.

“Sorry?”

“Mimes. You said mimes.”

“Yes, sir. Well, I’m not a mime myself, and you know that mimes are real people that speak out loud when they aren’t miming.”

I sighed. “Of course. What can I do for you? You have an e-zine that only publishes black-and-white cartoon drawings with no word-bubbles?”

The man was silent. "Is that a pun or something?" he finally asked.

This guy was not as much fun as the Boston woman.

"No, sir," he continued. "The New York Mimes is a professional society that brings together the professional mimes of the New York Metro area."

"Does that include Jersey mimes?"

"No, sir, it does not," said the man with a smirk in his voice.

"Good. I hate the Jersey mimes."

"Very good, sir."

"All right. So what do you need from Hidalgo?"

"Well, the New York Mimes is having its annual Freedom Ball at the Ritz downtown this weekend."

"Freedom Ball?" I was going to continue, but balls, mimes, and puns do not make a good soup, and so I stopped.

"Yes, sir. It is a closed-door event where all the mimes attend in full makeup, but on this one evening each year, they are allowed to speak when in full mime gear. They are free to be themselves, if you will. Hence Freedom Ball."

"That's a relief," I said. "And so this has nothing to do with Spandex versus boxer-shorts?"

The man was quiet, and I think he was actually holding his breath. I waited to see if his head would explode, and when it didn't I moved on.

"So what do you need from Hidalgo?" I asked.

"Oh, yes, of course. Well, sir, since the theme is freedom, and you, sir, are Hidalgo, we would like to have you speak at our event."

Speak? As in a speech? That was different from an e-zine e-interview. What would I say?

"We can pay you \$25,000, and we'll send a car for you."

“Will the driver be dressed like a mime?”

Some more silence. I think my mime jokes were wearing thin (like Spandex. Booyah), and so I accepted cordially and hung up.

Now let me be clear. Like I said before, I was doing okay with my call center business. Yes, things had picked up over the past couple of years, but I could see the writing on the wall. Call centers in Jersey was not a long-term growth business. All this stuff would be shipped back overseas soon enough, and I'd be left with windowless warehouses in Weehauken and five thousand obsolete and heavily-used headsets. And juggling my time between trying to get Tony Soprano's cousin to take over my lease while I frantically checked my headset-auctions on eBay did not sound fun. It was not something Hidalgo should have to do.

No, Hidalgo should be out there giving \$25,000 speeches about freedom to mimes at the Ritz-Carlton in downtown Manhattan.

6

What to wear? What would Hidalgo wear? I mean, what *does* Hidalgo wear? Flip-flops? No, too indecisive. A hat? No, too pretentious. A mime suit? No, too predictable, and possibly unsustainable and just plain confusing once the New York Mimes gig was done. Sunglasses? No, because then they wouldn't be able to see the rebel-fire burning in Hidalgo's eyes.

And that rebel-fire was burning bright already. Just a few days after being called Hidalgo, I was well on my way to becoming Hidalgo. The Lone Ranger. The Independent. He-Who-Walks-Alone.

Not that I was alone at the time. My social life seemed to be better than ever. Even the sweet women that asked me

out no longer asked me that question. If anything, they only brought up SpaceHook in reference to how stifling it was to be tracked by friends and family and co-workers and e-marketers. And when I pointed out that all of it was in fact cool and useful, and even the e-marketer stuff wasn't so bad because the marketers are going to get to you anyway, and so you may as well give them enough information for them to blitz you with products that you might actually buy, all I got were confused stares that said, "Wait, you're not Hidalgo. You're just some creep who's pretending to be Hidalgo so you can get inside my pants." And then they'd blow their rape whistles and I'd have to run away. (Actually, this only happened on one date, possibly because I never talked about the coolness and usefulness of SpaceHook again.)

But I slowly stopped agreeing to go on dates because it creeped me out to have some sweet girl want to sleep with me so she could tell her friends she had done it with Hidalgo. And eventually I even stopped asking out the few cool women that seemed unimpressed enough to only spend time with me if they actually liked me. I'm not sure when that happened, but I do remember why it happened.

Her name was Josephine Jessamyn Jackson, and she was a mime. I met her that night at the Ritz (right after my "It's About Mime We Had Some Freedom" speech bombed big-time, which is why you won't find a transcript of it in this account). She was the only mime who came up to me after the speech and acted somewhat civil. (I can't even describe how bad it was with the rest of those people. Mimes, as a group, are very, very bitter, petty people with a tendency to over-

react, I'm sorry to say.) She was like the treasurer or book-keeper or something of their little society, and so I guess she had to speak to me to at least inform me that their board had decided to withhold the last \$10,000 of the payment on account of the terribleness (their word, not mine) of my speech. But she didn't have to stay.

And she did stay. She sat down at the table next to me and watched me finish my black-and-white cookie and drink my milk. I in turn couldn't help but notice her mime-shaped figure and sweet expressive painted face. She insisted on miming her way through the rest of our conversation, and I felt I had never understood a woman better than I did that night (no, this is not a tongue-in-cheek statement. She really was awesome at that miming thing). She didn't come home with me that night, of course (what kind of mime do you think she was?), and I didn't ask her to (there would be mime for that later, I thought). She did, however, mime out her digits by contorting her body in astonishing ways. I didn't need to write down that number to remember what it looked like.

We dated for several months, and it was wonderful. She was funny and smart and wise, and she was at the top of her mime-game. We soon became the talk of New York City, and no event was even considered A-List without Hidalgo and Triple-J (yes, that sounds like a porn star, but it was her stage name, and her act was very wholesome).

Hidalgo and Triple-J. It has such a nice ring to it, right? I think so at least. Or thought so, I guess, since it doesn't ring out no more on the invite lists in NYC. TJ (short for Triple-J) was too cool for me. She was smarter and in better shape

and more comfortable with who she was than I could have hoped to be with myself even before I became Hidalgo, the man-with-no-space, the man-who-walks-alone. And soon, when TJ left me, I became the man-who-slept-alone.

The evening had started out just fine. I had been front row with some French dignitaries at TJ's grand finale of the New York performances of her show *Sleeveless in Seattle* (where the mimes wear tank-tops and are constantly being soaked in imaginary rain . . . you had to be there). The Frenchies were quite into it (the French seem to like mimes for some reason), and they kept asking me if I was Spanish (I guess Hidalgo does have some Spanish connotations, but more on that later).

Anyway, after the show we got (more) drunk with the French people, and when they started miming, TJ dragged me out of there and to a Dunkin' Donuts, where we sat and shared something with icing or frosting or glazing. It was one of those moments that seem so simple and ordinary that you know something terrible is going to happen, and something terrible did happen.

"So," she said to me, "I'm thinking of shutting down my SpaceHook account."

"Sorry, what?" I said.

"You know, going off the grid of oppression and all that." She waved her hands about as if drawing a grid in the air. I had used that term in a recent speech I gave to the Manhattan Power Company, and it had caused a stir before I clarified that I was speaking in virtual and metaphorical terms (like about the SpaceHook network that stretches out like

a grid so that one part is connected to any other part) and not physical terms (like about the New York City electricity power grid that is the life's work of these people). The speech ended up okay, and in fact the following day the electric workers went on strike and used my "Grid of Oppression" phrase on their picket signs. But I didn't sue. Sure, I waited until their \$40,000 check for my speech cleared before deciding that, but I didn't sue. I told you I was a sweet guy.

But, stop. Donut. TJ.

"You're kidding, right?" I said as I picked some more at the sprinkles (or was it chocolate crust), but I didn't care about the donut. I was trying to both interpret and control the feelings that were bubbling up at the time, and I managed to do neither. "You are kidding me. How freakin' lame can you get." Suddenly I was standing with my hands on my hips, and neither my stance nor my speech was impressive. She should have laughed at me and walked out right then, but she didn't. She stayed. Not for long, but she stayed.

"Why?" she said. "It's okay for you to do it, but if I do it, it suddenly becomes lame?"

"Not it. You. You become lame."

She stared at me with that sweet expressive face of hers, and her mouth was wide open and I could see the little raisins from the donut still on her white-painted tongue.

"Forget it," she said. "It's very late, and we're both drunk. Let's just enjoy this donut and go home."

I was drunk I suppose, but I felt clear because the rage and insecurity and panic inside me had curled into a donut shaped glob of clarifying sprinkles, and I could no longer

hold it all inside. I can't remember exactly what I said, but I think the following exchange sums it up quite nicely:

Me: HIDALGO HIDALGO HIDALGO HIDALGO!

TJ: Babe, please sit down.

Me: HIDALGO HIDALGO HIDALGO HIDALGO!

TJ: Sit the hell down and talk to me or I'm leaving.

Me: HIDALGO HIDALGO HIDALGO HIDALGO!

And then she left. She left me. She left me there with the sprinkles and the glazing and the raisins and the choco-crust and the frosting.

7

I dreamt of her beautiful white tongue for days, and even when the dreams stopped, I didn't feel much better. Hidalgo was hurting, and I didn't know why. Sure, I knew I loved TJ even though we had only been together for a few months, but that wasn't all of it. TJ's simple suggestion had driven me insane, explosively insane. That wasn't me. I ran a call center, for god's sake. We specialized in handling explosively insane people and calming them down to the point where we could up-sell or cross-sell them. I had written some of those training manuals. My articles had been published in *Call Center Comrade* (the underground call center newspaper of the Eastern Bloc countries in Europe) and *Hello Goodbye Thankyou* (the Far East Asian call center weekly publication). I had become the person I had been trained to tame, which meant I had lost it.

And so no, it wasn't me. I wasn't me. I was now Hidalgo. And TJ, poor (lucky) sweet TJ, had unwittingly pushed that Hidalgo button for the first time, pushed it before either of us really knew it was there and what it could unleash.

Once you're touted as an original, any threat to your originality cannot be tolerated by a Hidalgo. It's awesome for me to be off-the-grid, but now that everyone knows that it's awesome, mimicking that behavior is lame. It's the kind of thing that can only work for one person. It can only work once. Hidalgo was only about the oneness of Hidalgo, and there was nothing else but that oneness. If He-Who-Walks-Alone gets a sidekick, then the entire thing breaks down. It just gets silly then, and silliness is also one of those things that can only work once per silly act. And even that act had been done before.

But after I got past those initial few days, I suddenly began to feel the rebel-fire that had become the gin-and-juice to the Hidalgo of my Hidalgo. It's like demonic possession, when the invading entity slowly wears you down until you no longer have access to the person you were before the demon came along. Or like in civil disobedience (as in Gandhi or Dr. King), where the progression is "First they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they fight you, then they give up, and then you win."

HIDALGO HIDALGO HIDALGO HIDALGO!

Of course, I was on the losing side of that Gandhian progression, but it didn't matter, because the winning side (hidalgo) had taken over the losing side (Greg Hidalgo Merchant), and Hidalgo was all that remained. It wasn't so bad,

actually. The last few strands of Greg Merchant went away peacefully and smoothly, as if to say I was right not to fight it. Just like you need to turn an out-of-control car into the direction of the skid to save yourself, or like a boxer leans into a punch to take away its power. So I took in Hidalgo, and it felt good and right. And when I crossed that last threshold, it became clear to me that the oneness of Hidalgo meant that Hidalgo, He-Who-Walks-Alone, must always walk alone in order to be Hidalgo. It was quite simple really, almost by definition. You can't walk alone if you aren't alone.

HIDALGO HIDALGO HIDALGO HIDALGO!

That quickly became the chant, the chant they used to greet me or to call me out onto my terrace overlooking Central Park (West Side, of course) so I could say something rebellious. Sometimes I would hear it around the Lower East Side when I prowled around incognito in my yellow hoodie (just to see what people did when they weren't chanting my name. Turns out they just chanted my name during those times . . .).

HIDALGO HIDALGO HIDALGO HIDALGO!

It does have a nice ring to it, I think, I still think. Hidalgo was given to me by my maternal grandfather, a man I never met, or at least I don't remember meeting him. I was still very young when he died, and my parents never talked about him much. I got the sense that my mother never really knew him, or perhaps she just didn't like him. Either way, Hidalgo was his gift to me.

Not that it was a welcome gift. I can't really say too much about this (partly because my parents don't want to figure in

this story much, and partly because I don't know that much about it), but me being given the middle name of Hidalgo was apparently part of some deal my grandfather had made with my mum and dad. No, it wasn't anything to do with sorcery or witchcraft or any of that nonsense, but something to do with the Spanish-American War, which I guess some of my ancestors figured in. I don't know for sure if I have Spanish roots, but I never really checked. It doesn't matter, of course. I can't imagine how knowing any more about it could have changed anything that happened next.

Or even prepared me for it.

HIDALGO HIDALGO HIDALGO HIDALGO!

They woke me up before the sun that morning, and it was surprising. Rebel or not, I like my sleep. Getting less than eight hours a night increases your chance of early-deep-wrinkles by thirty-three percent, and with all the High Definition video and what-not, I had to worry about those details.

I scrambled to my feet and checked my e-mail and the newsfeeds to see if anything noteworthy had occurred since I had gone to bed. All my alerts for news items relevant to Hidalgo and his enemies came up blank, and so I figured it was just a bunch of all-night-partiers winding down after a concert or something. Perhaps Tim McGraw had played a show at the Garden. I yawned again and reviewed my list of rebel-curious quips for terrace-shouting, and picked one

that I thought would appeal to Tim McGraw fans (it includes some of his lyrics, and so I can't repeat it here due to copyright reasons).

After stepping up to my Hidalgo shouting-position, I shouted out my response to their adoring chants and then listened for the familiar aftermath. They typically chanted a few more times, and then the chanting would take on a different tone as my words got passed around and people understood the subtle puns that I was wont to include. Then the crowd would move off, usually to Central Park first, where they gathered in that Strawberry Fields gathering area and plotted some subversive (but nonviolent) thing to do for the day. It was a fun routine, and I loved it, but that day it started a bit too early.

This certainly wasn't a Tim McGraw crowd, because the chanting soon got uglier, and while I stood there with a sporting look on my face, I knew something was amiss. I felt a twitch near my hip, and I reached for it. It was my phone vibrating to tell me something. I checked, and I was glad that the sun was not up and so it was too dark for the crowd to see my face.

Boston woman deactivates her SpaceHook account. Says she doesn't need it anymore, and will walk alone as the Hidalgo of New England.

After quietly stepping down from my step-up stool, I raised the brownish-red flag that signaled that Hidalgo had left the building on a mission (or speaking engagement or ship-christening or other thing that paid not-less-than \$55,000 per three-hours with a four-hour-minimum). I drank my

Hidalgo-juice and checked the New England Patriots' record so I could be up-to-date when I went undercover in Boston. And did I mention earlier that New England scared me?

Well, now, as Hidalgo, all those old fears were converted (by some complex inner algorithm that operates on the same general principles of exponential expansion and unpredictable complexity) to hatred. Pure and simple hatred. Loathing. Spurn. Repugnance. And I carried it all with me up north where the New meets the England.

The Chinatown bus ride was bumpy, but I admit it was fun. I hadn't been able to take a bus for months now, and I was still in that gray area of wealthy (in between "very" and "disgustingly"), and so I still couldn't afford a Hidalgo-jet (although rebellious small airlines flew me anywhere for free). My yellow hoodie and Hidalgo-beard hid me well, and I looked like the kind of guy that even if you suspected was someone famous, you'd be too scared to approach just in case you were wrong. Because I will KILL you, man. (I practiced saying that.)

But practicing my Hidalgo-defense death-threats made me think about that Boston woman I would be meeting soon. I had in fact contacted her as Hidalgo (using my secured Hidalgo-phone-line) and asked her to meet incognito at a small Indian restaurant in Cambridge. (The Harvard kids never notice anyone due to intense self-absorption, and the MIT kids had stopped leaving their rooms since the advent of social networking or "remote socializing," as it was called around Kendall Square.) Now I knew this was a big risk, because if this truly was a power-grab, then she would leak

the news and we'd be mobbed and there would be pictures of the two Hidalgos, meaning that the original Hidalgo was neither original nor alone anymore.

In retrospect, it was a tremendous gamble, and if I had actually hired any Hidalgo-advisors, they would have stopped me or at least recommended against it. But something deep within my Hidalgo-soul told me not to take this news at face value. Something else was afoot. I ran call centers, for god's sake, and an understanding of the twists and tics of human psychology is key to running a successful and highly-rated call center.

So yes, my keen call-center-born and Hidalgo-nurtured understanding of the human condition pushed me to initiate contact with this New England Hidalgo-woman, but I was still *en garde* (as they say in French fencing school) as I dialed the number. And when I heard her voice, I knew I was right. Something indeed was afoot.

Because the voice was familiar. It was little Miss Robot-voice from the *Boston Globular*. The woman who had first called me Hidalgo, and the one who helped start it all.

Of course, at first I wondered if it was some kind of trick to get me to explode and embarrass myself in public, perhaps kill myself, or maybe kill her or try to do so. Perhaps the SpaceHook lobby had pushed her into it to bring me down. After all, SpaceHook couldn't have been happy with me.

But this is why I know that my Hidalgo instincts were actually ahead of my intelligence. My intuition was stronger than my powers of rational thought. My sponge was deadlier than my scalpel. Because it wasn't until I met with her that

the horrible twisted truth came out, right there as we both stared at the plates of goat-curry and chickpeas.

“It was them,” she whispered. Her eyes were red and big and I could see veins and other squiggly things on her forehead and neck. “I’m being made an example of. They’re going to take me down, so no one else ever dares.”

“Who? What?” I whispered back, hesitant to dive into my food. It seemed rude to suck on a goat-bone when the woman I was with was obviously distressed about something serious.

“SpaceHook,” she said. “They want the world to see what happens to someone who leaves, and so they engineered this ridiculous New England Hidalgo thing.”

“So you didn’t remove yourself from SpaceHook?”

“Of course not. I love SpaceHook. All my friends and family are on there, and I’m in third place in the New England Puncrubble league. That’s like Scrabble, but you can only use puns.”

“Of course,” I said and quickly ate a chickpea. (I should mention at this point that the woman’s name was Gertrude Fraggelopolous. I don’t know why I didn’t say that before, but there it is. Gertrude Fraggelopolous.)

Gertrude looked a lot different now. Of course, she had risen up the *Boston Globular* ranks after she broke the Hidalgo story, and I remember seeing her do some interviews with Bill Belichick where she appeared very well-fed and confident. Now, however, she looked like a beaten starving dog, like she had been on the run and hadn’t eaten for days, and I initially checked for signs of drug abuse: needle marks, stained or rotting teeth, propensity to laugh at

jokes that weren't puns, and other such dead giveaways. But she seemed clean enough in that sense, and I couldn't smell any alcohol on her either. What had happened? How could someone go from interviewing Bill Belichick to the point where they were about to be squashed like a bug by the foot of public opinion?

She made a sound. "It was my fault. I should never have—"

"Never have what?" I was worried now, worried that she would break down and cause a scene or something, and that people would see the two Hidalgos. After all, Hidalgo must protect Hidalgo first, if only for the sake of the people. Just like the president must put aside his humanity and allow other people to die for him sometimes.

"Never have written that article questioning why more people haven't left SpaceHook. It seemed odd to me that after you became so famous, no one else thought about deactivating their account."

I knew why. I didn't say it right away, but I knew why. It had occurred to me right after TJ left me and when I suspected that she wouldn't really have left SpaceHook. After all, she was an artist. Her originality was as deeply important to her as Hidalgo's was to Hidalgo. Maybe TJ was just messing with me that night, or she wanted to push my buttons a bit, or maybe she was just drunk. Whatever it was, it wasn't serious. And that's when I had realized that no one would leave SpaceHook.

After all, SpaceHook was a necessity, almost like a utility in these modern times. The service it provided was cool and adaptable and efficient and, well, perfect. It got better every

year, and people found more ways to use it for the good of humankind and what-not. And so the only reason to ever leave would be to take a stand, to make a point.

But that point had been made already. Hidalgo had made that point. Not intentionally, of course, because in my pre-Hidalgo days I had never wanted to make that point. But you know how that self-fulfilling-prophecy mechanism works in this world. And so it was exactly like what I had screamed to TJ that night. To take a stand against SpaceHook when Hidalgo was already standing there would be lame and silly and pointless, and since the modern American is too media-aware and self-conscious to do anything that publicly lame and silly and pointless, Hidalgo would stand alone by virtue of that dynamic. That was why my hordes, while ready to kill and die for me, had no intention or desire to actually be like me.

Unless, of course, someone made a public argument for there being more people to stand with Hidalgo. If someone started to make a case that there would be some honor and some point in being the second and third and fourth and three-hundredth Hidalgo, then the wind could change and the current could start moving the other way. And so SpaceHook had done what any living organism would do: identify the threat and take it down before the threat becomes too threatening. SpaceHook knew that by prematurely (that is, before the tide turned and while it was still universally lame to leave SpaceHook) naming Gertrude the “New England Hidalgo” and turning her into a public and private joke, they would not only take out a potentially dangerous revolutionary,

but would also reinforce the prevailing wisdom that to leave would be lame.

Which meant that I, Hidalgo, He-Who-Walks-Alone, The Last Independent, was in effect walking on the same side as SpaceHook. They wanted me to be the symbol of the outside world, the rebel non-Spacer, the Lone Ranger, because as long as I walked alone, I maintained the balance of their universe.

And as I took another look at poor starving Gertrude Fraggelopolous, I knew what had to be done. Just like a great leader must sometimes allow others to fall so that he may fulfill his destiny, I had to do it.

So I ate my goat-curry, paid the bill, and I left her there.
HIDALGO HIDALGO HIDALGO HIDALGO!

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I could hear the chanting from blocks away as my taxi from the Chinatown bus stop took me home to the Upper West Side, and I could feel my rebel-fire start up again as I whispered the chant under my breath. The Pakistani cab driver looked at me suspiciously, but I pulled my hoodie down and whispered my “. . . kill you, man” line just loud enough for him to look away and speed up.

The cabbie dropped me off out back, where the dedicated Hidalgo-doorman was waiting with a few associates just in case some chanters chanced upon us. I ran into my Hidalgo-elevator and got upstairs and changed the color of the Hidalgo-flag (via my special Hidalgo-flag-changing-machine) and ran out onto the Hidalgo terrace.

The juice of the crowd drove me wild, and I didn't even care about speaking but simply joined in the chant as my

body heaved and turned to the rhythm of the four-stroke Hidalgo-beat.

HIDALGO HIDALGO HIDALGO HIDALGO!

Oh yes.

HIDALGO HIDALGO HIDALGO HIDALGO!

Ah yeah.

HIDALGO HIDALGO HIDALGO HIDALGO!

Hey now.

HIDALGO HIDALGO HIDALGO HIDALGO!

Eventually the police came with their hoses and dogs (yes, hoses and dogs had been reactivated for Hidalgo-crowd-control) and drove away the chanters. By then I was soaked and drained, and I dragged myself indoors and took a shower and then collapsed into bed, still twitching to the sound of that Hidalgo-beat. I had needed the physical exertion. The magnitude of my decision up in Boston that day had not escaped me. I had been in a position to possibly help someone and I had stepped away from her—nay, stepped on her. They say your character is nothing other than the sum total of your decisions, and so if my journey to the nether regions of the Hidalgo had not been complete before, it was now.

And so the dreams of a beautiful Greek woman with fraggle-like hair drowning in quicksand did not bother me, and I woke up late and did my daily Hidalgo-morning-service for the chanters and drank my Hidalgo-juice and went through my Hidalgo-workout-routine, voice-training-session, and pun-enhancement mental exercises. I had just finished reading the latest vicious anti-Gertrude editorials when the call came in.

“Hidalgo,” came the voice of an androgynous primate.

I waited for three more repetitions of the sacred word, but they did not come, and so I was about to hang up when my Hidalgo-instinct told me not to.

“This is Maryanne Klaussner from SpaceHook’s Survival Unit,” she said.

“Achtung,” I said pleasantly. “Sprechenzi Deutsche?”

She cleared her throat. “I’m from Seattle.”

“Of course.” I tried to think of something witty and interesting to say about Seattle, but that was too great a task even for Hidalgo, and so I let it go.

“We need to talk,” she said.

“Yes. I agree.”

“I’m a block from your building. May I come upstairs?”

I hesitated. No woman had been into the Citadel of Hidalgo since TJ had left, and even though this obviously wasn’t a romantic meeting, the thought made me uneasy. Perhaps I should have recognized the uneasiness as a Hidalgo-warning of what was to come, but, looking back now, perhaps there was another part of the Hidalgo-mantis-psyche that welcomed the discomfort, even longed for it.

I called down to inform the doorkeepers, and then I put on my Hidalgo-robe and waited for the German android from Seattle. I guessed she was coming to tell me what I had already figured out, and this would be a simple matter of her offering me an obscene amount of cash for simply doing what I did and being who I was. This, in a nutshell, is the essence of capitalism and freedom, but I’ll stop there because of my promise not to rant about those murky topics.

The deal would have to be secret, of course, since the public was considerably smarter now that they could easily share opinions and information. If it got out that SpaceHook was paying Hidalgo, the subtle difference that Hidalgo was not being paid *to be* Hidalgo but being paid because he *was* Hidalgo would be lost, and mayhem, chaos, bankruptcy, and loneliness would follow. My daydream was interrupted by the special Hidalgo-buzzer indicating the arrival of another, and I went to the door fully prepared for the simple but secret transaction.

Ms. Klaussner was a very tough looking woman, and the muscle definition on her face was very striking. Although my gut told me she was who she said she was, my call center habits had not left me yet, and I asked for some proof.

“Here’s my business card,” she said professionally and with no hint of being offended by my request.

I looked at the card. It seemed very well designed, and her name and the SpaceHook logo were done in expensive raised lettering. But still, if someone were trying to fake their way into the inner sanctum of Hidalgo’s lair, they probably wouldn’t skimp on the fake business cards.

“Anyone can print up a business card,” I said flatly.

She reached into her pant-suit pocket and whipped out a heavy-looking metallic business card holder and handed it to me. Its weight was impressive, and the SpaceHook logo on the front was certainly done by a top craftsman. Inside were at least a hundred business cards, and this certainly was better. Better, but not enough.

“Better, but not enough,” I said.

She smiled, and her facial muscles moved in a very nice smooth way. I wondered if she was simply amused at my persistence or laughing at how pointless the verification was since she was already inside my house alone with me. Regardless, she pulled out what must have been the final bit of proof: her SpaceHook ID card, complete with metallic strip, high-density memory chip, and all kinds of fancy un-fakeable holograms.

“Please sit down, Ms. Klaussner,” I said sweetly.

“Thank you. Please call me Maryanne.”

“Okay. And you may call me Hidalgo Hidalgo Hidalgo.” Of course, I meant this as a joke. I kind of wanted to see her well-defined smile again.

She didn’t smile, and I was embarrassed. She simply looked down for a second as if getting ready to start her offer.

“Hidalgo,” she said. “I think you know that SpaceHook has been paying close attention to your remarkable rise over the past few months.”

“Of course.”

“Yes. And while we were initially concerned that you would attempt to lead some kind of rebellion against our service, that has obviously not happened. You remain the only American not on SpaceHook.”

At this last bit my heart jumped. Had Gertrude simply been pulled back into the SpaceHook community? Or was it something darker? For a moment I feared SpaceHook had literally taken her out, perhaps faked an accident or something. And then I almost choked as I considered the possibility that the poor woman took her own life.

“But what about Gertrude?” I tried to stay calm and not reveal either that I had met with her or that I had just run through the worst-case scenarios in my Hidalgo-mind.

“The press hasn’t put the news through yet, but Ms. Fraggelopolous was stripped of her American citizenship earlier today.”

“Is that even possible?”

“If the people want it, sure. You obviously couldn’t know this, but a SpaceHook group was organized for that specific purpose, and once its membership hit seventy-five percent of the US population, the president gave the order and the Supreme Court approved it. She will be sent to Greece, where she has some distant relatives. And of course her SpaceHook account will be reinstated as per her last request before boarding the plane.”

I nodded. “She loved SpaceHook. At least she’s got that.”

Maryanne flinched slightly. “How do you know that?”

I smiled a fresh Hidalgo-smile, but I said nothing.

She leaned back on my Hidalgo-diwan and cracked her knuckles. “Well anyway, let’s get to the meat, shall we?”

“Let’s.”

“My superiors at the SpaceHook Survival Unit have prepared a package—”

“SpaceHook Survival Unit. You said that earlier. Is that a pun or something?”

“Certainly not. We’re based in Seattle, and we don’t use puns there. No, the Survival Unit is simply our Corporate Strategy Task Force. Our mission is to make sure SpaceHook survives.”

“Survives what?”

She smiled. “Anything, Mr. Hidalgo.”

This was the first time she had addressed me as Mr. Hidalgo, and it should have put me *en garde*, but I admit I was a bit taken with watching the perfectly etched lines on her face move as she talked.

“Anyway, as I was saying,” she went on, “my bosses sent me here to offer you a package. A no-strings-attached gift, if you will. A token of mutual understanding, given with and to be accepted with the acknowledgement that it’s best if we do not make explicit, even between the two of us right now, why this gift is being offered.”

I leaned back on my heavily ornamental Hidalgo-sitting-chair and congratulated my Hidalgo-instincts. I had been right. I was the one that balanced the SpaceHook universe. I was the fulcrum on which the delicate plank of American social life was perched. I was Hidalgo, a modern Atlas, but unlike Atlas, not cursed with a globular shoulder-load but blessed with a soft and comfortable fanny-pack.

“But,” she continued, “as I learned in my Harvard Business School class taught by Bill Belichick that combines strategic game theory with hand-to-hand mortal-combat, the best strategic move is one that is a surprise to even the people on your team.”

“Sorry, what?”

“I’m saying that even though my bosses sent me here to make you an offer, I will not be.”

“Not be what? Is this some kind of weird Seattle-trick that I don’t understand because you guys also have a different

definition for the word pun? Or are you just here to kill me?” I smiled, hoping I’d see her awesome smile.

But the only flash of white I saw came from the ivory blade that she pulled from a ladylike place. And then came the smile, but I couldn’t quite take it in because she had already begun stabbing.