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## Best of All Possible Worlds

by John Chu

A trumpet fanfare blasts inside my head. Intricate violin runs assault me. I nearly drop my spatula in surprise. Since no orchestra is actually performing the overture to Candide in my kitchen, Declan must be bounding up the stairs to my apartment. I flip over the scallion pancake sizzling in my frying pan before it can burn.

Scraps of dough litter the glass bowl, cookie sheet and rolling pin stacked in my sink. Flour dusts the counter. Oil has splattered all over the range. The rest of the apartment, just one room aside from the bathroom, isn't much better. The light through the one window highlights the stacks of books on the floor and the mess of papers burying my laptop on the coffee table. Declan has seen the apartment look worse than this. I don't even consider cleaning up, not there's time before Declan shows up. The door into the apartment rattles just as I slide that last pancake onto the stack with the rest.

By now, voices are singing inside my head. They alternate verses about war and peace in Westphalia. I recognize the tune as that of the opening number, but I only know of this version of the lyrics. It'd only been performed in public once, at a concert held at New York City's Philharmonic Hall in 1968. A

bootleg undoubtedly exists but I doubt it sounds this good.

I shut off the range, and open the door. Declan smiles down at me.

"Can I have some?" Declan's voice only has one volume, booming. He looks exactly the way he sounds.

"Hi, Declan." The music in my head gets softer.

He looks over me into the kitchen. "I can smell them from home."

Declan lives across town. If anyone else had said that, I'd say that they were being hyperbolic. With Declan, I'm not sure. Over the past several years of grad school, we seem to have made an implicit deal: I don't let on that he's not human and he... I hear complete, historically important performances of American musicals when he's around. Honestly, he could actually be human--I'd feel like an idiot asking--except that wouldn't explain the high fidelity surround-sound inside my head right now.

He deploys his gaze. Anyone who looks like he spent his glory days on the offensive line of his high school football team a decade ago should not have eyes that pleading. Then again, I like the smell of toasted sesame oil too and the pancakes are better hot.

I step aside and he blurs past the worn, ashen couch into the kitchen. The top pancake is still greasy with hot oil but neither his hands nor his mouth seems to notice. If he were this

careless around anyone else, they wouldn't think he was human either. However, he's like this only around me.

Maybe I'm not one to talk about fitting in. My parents weren't born in this country, but at least my ancestors stretching back to time immemorial were all born on this planet.

"Thanks, Irving." He limits himself to only the top pancake. The stack looks remarkably unmolested sitting next to my rice cooker. "Hope Dr. Spencer likes your talk."

My advisor wants to know what the hell I've been up to. That means a presentation to the entire research group and I'm not above bribing them with food. What'll probably happen at the meeting is that Declan will polish off the rest of the stack by the time I hit my third slide and my work will have to stand for itself. That's okay. Without him, they'd have kicked me out of grad school by now. I wrote and now maintain the simulation that serves as the substrate for his research and he makes sure I file my paperwork on time. That deal was explicit and, as far as I'm concerned, I got the better part of the bargain.

His eyes narrow. "You really are nervous about this, aren't you?"

I shrug. A dissertation could totally happen. Microprocessor caches traditionally store fixed-sized blocks of data. A cache that stores variable sized blocks might perform better. It's utterly not impossible that I might convince Dr. Spencer of that and he won't drop me as a student. Maybe. I

start to tell Declan when his gaze shifts behind me to the window.

Declan throws himself on me. His weight pins me to the floor, squeezing the air from my lungs. He's chunky, but the pressure on my body feels like he's made of lead. "I'm sorry, Irving. Don't take this personally--"

Sound of glass shattering drowns him out. A harsh light fills the room. The music in my head goes silent.

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Apparently, when Declan shoves you to the ground, you end up in what may be the most ambitious environmental production of Candide ever. Or, at least, I hope that's where I am.

A gallows dominates the town square. Men in vestments stand on a raised platform under a canopy. The vamp into Candide's Auto-da-fé sequence saturates the air. The music isn't inside my head, but it can't be coming from actual instruments either. The space is too open to hide an orchestra or speakers. The air seems to be playing the music by itself.

Townsfolk stream in. They crowd the gallows, making loud conversation and jockeying for a good view. Their breeches and dresses seem impossibly crisp and clean. Their clothing are in blues, reds and greens that pop against their pale skin. I feel underdressed, not to mention in the wrong century, in my T-shirt and jeans.

The hubbub fades as one of the men in vestments proclaims,

in modern American English, that in order to prevent more earthquakes, they will find and hang all the heretics in Lisbon. All at once, the crowd turns on me.

The crowd sings the A section of the Auto-da-fé, about what a perfect day they've picked for watching heretics hang. All the while, they grope for me. I try to push them away, but by the time they've finish the A section's second verse they've forced me down, tied my arms behind my back and fettered my legs. The ropes burn against my wrists and my ankle smarts whenever I put weight on it.

The music shifts abruptly into syncopated, jazzy dance music. I've never heard this interlude placed so early in any production of Candide before. The crowd dances using me as a prop. They pick me up, passing me along until I am part of a line of people who hadn't existed two verses ago. They're tied up too. We must be the heretics sent to face the inquisitors before being hanged at the gallows.

Hi, Irving. Even inside my head, Declan's voice booms. Sorry for the lack of warning. The attack came sooner than I'd expected. Hope you're having fun.

Attack? I have no idea what he's talking about, or any way to answer him.

Armed guards lead heretics away one at a time. A few people are still ahead of me but I'm not the last in line any more. The crowd launches into the B section of the song. They jostle each

other for a good view of the festivities as they sing jauntily about broken jaws and people stretched on racks. Screams and the crack of bone pierce through me. Those sounds aren't part of the script.

Irving, can you hear me? Declan interrupts himself with a sharp grunt. It's easier to answer if you sub-vocalize.

I think I'm about to be hanged. I have no idea why I'm so calm about this.

They skipped you ahead to Lisbon? Bastards. He emphasizes the last word as if he's shoving something heavy. Don't die.  
Under no circumstances should you allow yourself to die.  
Couldn't you have just blended into the crowd?

I wish Declan were here right now. He so deserves a dope slap.

Blend in? In Lisbon immediately after the 1755 earthquake?  
When they were actively searching for anyone different to kill  
in order to appease God?

Someone pushes me ahead in line. I land on my ankle. Pain shoots up my leg. A guard crushes my arm in his grip, pulling me upright.

That's right. You can't change how you look. Damn. He sounds as if he wants to give himself a dope slap. You know the musical better than anyone alive so it's still safer there for you than in your apartment. He stifles a scream with a sharp inward breath through his teeth. Concentrate on alternate

versions. Stall the narrative until I can pull you back out.

In theory, there's no shortage of material. Bernstein and his lyricists wrote so many alternatives for Lisbon that every major production of Candide seemed to have its own version of the Auto-da-fé sequence. The original production watered the inquisition down to a street fair. Candide and his master, Pangloss, get in trouble only because the Infant Casmira singles them out as the reason for the earthquake that they had witnessed as their ship sailed into Lisbon.

As I focus, stalls appear. They ring the square. Men and women hawk combs, hats, and concoctions in bottles of varied shapes and colors. A dancing bear spins in front of one of the stalls. Smells of smoke and roasted meat fill the air. Heretics are still marched to the inquisitors one by one to the crowd singing the B section of the "Auto-da-fé" again. The inquisitors work quickly and by the time I realize the song hasn't changed, I'm at the head of the line. If I can't restart the song, maybe I can make it go sideways.

A man with a metal nose, Pangloss, materializes ahead of me in line. He sings his plea to the inquisitors. Bernstein and his lyricists wrote two different syphilis songs for Pangloss. This one is set to the same tune that the crowd has been singing. It recounts the provenance of his disease, who gave it to whom who gave it to whom and so on until the servant girl, Paquette, gave it to him. The litany goes on for minutes. Unfortunately, when

he's finally done, I'm still here, next in line to face the inquisitors.

Declan?

Not yet. Too many trying to get past me. Keep stalling.

Guards drag me towards the inquisitors standing on their canopied platform. As they do, a tiled floor spreads across the ground. The stalls slide away and the gallows slides off to one side. The canopy rises, expanding into a ceiling. Walls stretch up from the floor. The platform rears up until it becomes a cross between a choir stall and a long desk that runs the length of the room. The inquisitors sit. Their vestments writhe across their bodies, turning into ties and double breasted suits.

The crowd sits in a gallery behind me. A low railing separates us. The guard pushes me into a chair behind a long table. Photographers crouch just in front of it, aiming themselves at the inquisitors. Flash bulbs explode. For an instant, the inquisitors look like Mom, Dad, and Dr. Spencer.

"One percent is not a significant performance improvement." The inquisitors intone Bernstein's harmonies exactly. However, LaTouche, Parker, Wilbur, Sondheim, and Bernstein himself definitely did not write those words.

I try to speak, but end up intoning my words to Bernstein's music. "My simulations account for more more real-life difficulties than most--"

"Your design is too complicated." The inquisitors lean into



me. The stark overhead light makes their faces skeletal.

"It takes into account practicalities like multiple nodes racing for the same block of data. Most research--"

"It can lose track of who last modified the data when two nodes disagree over the block size."

My eyebrows rise. Someone has been reading my research and working out the ramifications. I'm not sure if I'm supposed to be happy that someone is taking my work seriously or sad that they immediately pinpointed the problem I've been banging my head on.

"It's not done yet. That's why they call it research--"

"Hang him." They sound positively lusty.

Guards grab my arms and lift me out of the chair. The gallows multiply and spread across the room as the table melts into the floor. Dead men sway and necks break on the gallows as the crowd watches. Guards carry me to the last of the gallows. The more I struggle, the more they twist my body in ways it wasn't meant to twist.

As they march me up the steps to the rope, it finally occurs to me that in some versions of this scene, a second earthquake happens about now. It's meant to be ironic. There's no reason why this couldn't be one of those versions. If I can escape the hanging, maybe I can follow Candide to El Dorado. That has to be the safest place in the entire musical.

The world shakes. Cracks spread across the ceiling, the

walls and floor. The crowd falls, chanting in Latin as they pile on top of each other. The guards lose their grip and I manage a step before my ankle gives way and I fall off the gallows. My nose slams against the floor. Blood drips down my face and down my throat. Chunks of plaster drop from the ceiling. They punch my back before the gallows itself lurches apart and crashes on top of me.

The world goes white. I'll never see Declan again, or anyone else for that matter. If I do though, the first thing I'll do is deck him.

#

The world smells like toasted sesame oil. Something feels lumpy under my back. My ankle should throb, but it doesn't.

"Irving, everything's ok. You can open your eyes now."

Declan. My apartment comes into focus. He's sitting on my coffee table. I sit up on the couch and swing for his jaw. My fist connects with his chest. It feels like I've punched stale modeling clay. He looks down then his mouth forms a small "o" as if he'd just discovered a dribble of oil on his shirt. My hand hurts like hell.

"Yeah." He purses his lips. "I'll have to teach you how to fight better than that if you're going to get your PhD."

Part of me realizes I should ask what he's talking about. The rest of me is struck dumb by my apartment. I can see the floor. The books that had covered it now sit in bookcases I

don't remember owning. My refrigerator is so clean and shiny, it can double as a full length mirror. Not only is the window not broken, its sill has been restained a fecund brown. The couch, once a faded black, now wants to absorb the color from the rest of the room. My kitchen sparkles. The whole apartment's like that. I squint, as if that can make everything normal again.

"Did I miss a blood stain?" Declan looks puzzled. "That stuff got all over the place."

"Blood stain?" Part of me doesn't want to know. "Why would there be--"

"I promised to do whatever it takes to make sure you defend your dissertation." He nods, as if he's just answered my question.

Baby steps. Finding some common ground would be good about now.

"You only promised to help me with paperwork."

"Well, yes." He rolls his eyes. "That's what I promised you."

Someone wants to make sure I complete my dissertation. My mind instantly leaps to the worst. It's even plausible.

"Oh, no. How are my parents the first people to find alien..."

I freeze. I've never called him alien before.

"It's about time you said that out loud. You've been thinking it for years." He smiles. "Relax. It's not your

parents."

"Wait, but why--"

"Whoa, whoa." He holds a palm out to me. "All in good time. If you knew about me first thing, would we be good friends now?"

Declan doesn't actually wait for an answer. "Exactly. You'd have run screaming like a maniac in the complete opposite direction. Now, if you don't leave immediately, you'll miss the bus and be late for the presentation to Dr. Spencer. That would be bad."

He thrusts my messenger bag into my lap. The top of the bag feels warm and the smell of scallion pancakes wafts out. It's only now that I realize I'm not wearing a T-shirt and jeans any more. I'm wearing my button down shirt, my pair of trousers and my loafers.

"When--"

He pulls me to my feet before I can get two words out. His hands squeeze my shoulders and he pushes me to the door.

"Here, I saved one for you." He presses a scallion pancake wrapped in a greasy paper towel into my hands. "Don't worry. No one will try to kill you between here and school."

Declan's bedside manner is about as settling as a jackhammer. If he tries to reassure me any more, I'll probably die from the stress.

He opens the door and I sigh at his expectant stare. The door squeals as I leave.

"Wait." My hand blocks the door from the jamb. It reopens. "Can I hear the rest of the concert some time? I barely got out of the opening number before..."

"Before you were attacked." He shrugs. "Anytime. Just let me know. You've always been so intent on making me read your mind to work out what you want. It's easier if you just tell me. Now, go. I'll see you at your presentation."

"Can I listen to it on the way to school?" I want to tease out what Declan can, or can't do. Besides, if someone's trying to kill me, I ought to, at the very least, get some good music out of this.

A goofy grin spreads across his face. For a few seconds, he seems positively human. He waves goodbye then shuts the door. I press my ear against it. Some unintelligible rumbling filters through before Declan shouts that I'll miss the bus if I don't leave right now.

Declan doesn't have a car either. I'd ask how he's getting to school, but I can practically hear him say "All in good time" in my head. What I do hear is Candide and Cunegonde's oblivious love duet where they disagree about everything except how happy they will be together.

I wind down the stairs. Each step feels like my last. Whether they are, I guess, depends on me, not Declan. The pancake in my hand is still warm and pliable. I take a bite and savor the salt and oil. Not bad, but I'll make the next batch

better.

END