

“Are you tired of the bureaucrats in Washington?! Have you had your fill of the scraps they toss to you while they stuff themselves at your expense?! I do! I do, and I say we’ve stood silently on the sidelines *long enough!*”

The crowd surged against the stage like a tide of flesh. Burly men in black sunglasses linked arms to hold back the flood, earplugs scarcely touching the deafening roar of ten thousand angry cries of assent. Ten thousand faces yelled or nodded, screamed praise or tilted attentively, drinking in every word issuing from the podium above. Fists punched violently at the air, as if to chastise the sluggish aether for its lack of enthusiasm.

The wide outdoor stage was brilliantly decorated, red, white, and blue bunting strung across the front, clusters of balloons and gaudy streamers streaked the sky with audacious vibrancy. This bright tableau was broken in the center by a smear of black. Under the blazing sun, beneath the azure sky, amongst the patriotic hangings, a thin man in a black suit paced the stage. He seemed almost a hole, a rip in a photograph. His large hands spread palms-down over the crowd as he motioned for silence. Only reluctantly did the assembly abandon their screams.

“Yes! You know it better than I do! It’s your money they’ve stolen, doled it out to special interests, the lobbyists and panderers, the businesses and their CEOs! Am I right?!”

The crowd screamed confirmation.

“You know it! All of you know it! So *why are you all just sitting there?!*” The unexpected accusation silenced the assembly. A murmur of disquiet pulsed along the fringes.

“You have the vision! You have the purpose! You have the conviction! You have the faith, you have the passion! All you lack...” He paused, scanned the faces with his piercing stare. “Is a *leader!*”

Absolved of guilt, the crowd roared adulation anew. The speaker spread his hands, smiling his trademark crooked smile. He rocked slightly on the balls of his feet. Yet another perfectly-executed bait-and-switch. Make them feel responsibility, then turn around and shoulder it for them... And they’ll love you forever. Bright banners boldly bore his name in three-foot font, the horde before him brandished homemade signs extolling his virtues and condemning his opposition to a thousand particularly creative hells. He was a patriot, yes, and he truly loved his country. Let no man deny it. But this... This. Ten thousand to follow wherever he led. The fanatical devotion of half a nation... This made it all worthwhile. He gestured again for quiet.

“Thank you! Thank you. It’s your dedication that’s brought us here. It’s that same dedication that will take us all the way to Washington. Our adherence to truth, our passion for clarity, and our willingness to do what must be done...”

The chain of security guards paid no mind to the speech. They watched carefully for glints of metal, erratic movements, slouch hats and trench coats. This speech had been given fifty times before, fifty different towns, fifty different rallies during this interminable campaign. They knew it by heart, and instead focused on hypothetical assassins concealed in the crowd. Likewise the hundred attendants, technicians, cameramen, photographers and stagehands were mindful only of their tasks. But beyond the inattention of the staff, another in attendance ignored the stirring rhetoric from the stage.

She lurked amongst the crowd, patently inconspicuous, blue jeans and a red shirt, a campaign button pinned to her sleeve. Dark sunglasses and a ballcap hid her features from the watchful eyes, flesh and glass, that monitored the event. Her every feature seemed tailor-made to blend seamlessly into the assembly. She looked exactly like a hundred others, and strongly resembled a thousand more. The only incongruous blemish on her flawless disguise was the disgusted scowl on her face.

Her eye twitched uncontrollably behind her mirrored glasses. She nearly shook with suppressed rage. Every honey-slick word, every false promise, every lie, every morally outrageous position he expounded filled her to bursting with a terrible hate. She could feel it oozing out of her eyeballs, dripping from her nose, pooling about her feet, so much hate it would surely drown the whole nauseating rally. Hate had become her world. When she had first seen the pompous bastard on television, attacking everything she held dear, calling down condemnation upon her every value, his philosophy of government anathema to reason and justice... Her violent response had necessitated the purchase of a new T.V. set.

It had taken her two months to prepare, and since then she had followed the campaign. Always from a distance, always hidden among the faces, she had cultivated her hate. It grew within her like a living thing, like a subterranean well tapped and brought to surface. It bubbled and frothed and foamed like a boiling sea. Each drop of hate she saved. She bottled it and stored it in her heart; she catalogued and filed it in her mind. Now. Now, at last, there was enough. She felt it attain equinox, the prime alignment of hate, an event of cosmic proportion. Her righteous blow would knock the filthy bastard from his throne. She gingerly fingered the talisman in her pocket, felt it grow warm in her hand. It pulsed with the flow of her hate, she gathered and focused it, funneled it entirely into the little wooden totem. She pumped her fist into the air in synch with the roaring crowd, the carved doll clutched tight within.

The September sun beat down upon the gathering with malign radiance. The candidate atop his stage wiped sweat from his brow and shaded his eyes with his hand. He looked out over his thronging supporters. The heat was becoming oppressive; his skin itched against his silk shirt. He pulled a deep breath and continued.

“If I lead, will you follow? Follow me now, and we’ll march into Washington and take back your government from the lobbyists! Follow me now, and we’ll march into the

Supreme Court and take back your stolen liberty! *Follow me and we'll take baaeehk...*" He coughed, choked on the word.

"We'll take baa-aa-aehek!" He grimaced as he gaffed again. The heat must be too much; he must have shouted himself hoarse. He raised a hand in reassurance, straightened up, and bellowed:

"TAKE IT BAAA-AA-A-AAAH!" His eyes flew wide in shock at the bleating sound. Sweat poured from his face, as much from the terrible knowledge of his onrushing political doom as from the ever-increasing heat. He worked a finger down his collar, tugging it loose as he tried desperately to speak.

"Baa-aaah! Mleheheh, meeeheeh! Baa-aa-haa!" An unintelligible bleating was all he could coax from his beleaguered throat. Twenty thousand eyes watched the candidate panic on stage. He cast desperately around for a doctor; he needed to find a doctor! He must be having a stroke - a stroke, or some neural failure, a heart attack... Thought in terror, what else causes aphasia? And the heat! It couldn't just be the sun now; it was too much, too fast. With sudden strength he ripped open his collar, tore clean through his expensive silk tie. A glossy American flag lapel pin clattered to the stage on a scrap of shredded fabric as he hastily discarded his jacket.

He tore his shirt open. The silvery buttons glittered in the sunlight as they popped off into the crowd. Half naked now, the heat still overwhelmed him. In fact, he still felt fully clothed. He looked down at his chest, clasped his hands to his stomach. A thick coat of curly white hair had completely covered his torso, concealed at first by his Armani suit. He bleated in confused panic and tried to pull it off to no avail. It was sprouting directly from his skin, still, in fact, thickening, lengthening and curling in puffy white tangles. As he groped futilely at his chest he began to recognize the texture of... wool?

The wooly skin beneath his fingers felt itchy, inflamed, he felt it begin to swell. A rash? Some fluid build-up in his chest, or...? His chest puffed and expanded, layer upon layer of fatty tissue building into twin bulges that forced themselves up underneath his probing hands. The nipples, yet-unfurred and strangely black in color, pressed against his palms with disturbing and sensitive insistence. He looked down in disbelief at his new cleavage, a large pair of pert breasts hung upon his chest.

A sudden wave of nausea forced the candidate to his knees. His abdomen groaned and gurgled, internal organs warping and shifting. He felt his waist contract even as his hips expanded, felt plush flesh plumping his thighs and rear. The bizarre sensations of a new limb asserted themselves as a stubby tail poked out above his waistband. As he fumbled to remove his suddenly-undersized belt, he witnessed his fingers merge together and stiffen into broad, clumsy hands, two fingers and a thumb topped with dense black nails. He pawed awkwardly at the buckle before snapping it off with a bleat of irritation. The nausea intensified, moving downward into his groin.

He fell heavily back onto his plump posterior as he finally divested himself of pants and shorts, far too overcome with panic to concern himself with flashing his ten thousand assembled supporters. The slacks fell away from his wooly legs just in time to afford him a view of his retreating member, the queasy shifting feeling manifesting externally in a new set of female genitals.

He, now *she*, sat dumbly on the stage. Her feet had reconfigured into dainty black hooves, slipping neatly out of her shoes in the process. She bleated again, wearily, as her nose expanded, nostrils broadening, taking in new scents as her face pushed out into a blunt muzzle. Her teeth grated slightly as they rearranged into grinding mechanisms, her large, sensitive lips quivered slightly in the warm air. Shock had dulled her mind into near-insensibility. With large, glistening black eyes she surveyed her surroundings.

She became suddenly aware of her situation: Not of her gender reversal, sudden nudity, or transformation halfway into an animal, but rather that ten thousand people were watching her, waiting for her. Her head flew desperately about, looking for someone, *anyone*, to tell her what to do, where to go. Every eye was upon her. Bleating helplessly, she hauled herself unsteadily to her hooves. Her broad nose took in the confusion of scents, her ears twitched in nervous agitation. She remained onstage for perhaps ten seconds more before panic overtook her and she fled the stage, breasts and rump jiggling in a wooly flounce.

Back amongst the cacophonous confusion of the crowd, the candidate's anonymous nemesis smiled in malicious satisfaction. She dropped the wooden fetish to the ground and crushed it beneath her shoe, grinding it until all that remained was a small pile of splinters. Mission complete, and with a pleasing poetic flair. After all... Who would follow a sheep?