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## *Research Question*

**On June 12, 1970, Dock Ellis of the Pittsburgh Pirates started against the San Diego Padres. Ellis no-hit the Padres, walking eight including three hit batsmen. What makes the feat less remarkable is that the Padres were only in their second season as a franchise and finished the season with a .389 winning percentage. What makes it more is that Ellis pitched the no-hitter under the influence of LSD.**

I don't blame people for wondering whether it's true. There was this one sports reporter, Bill Christine, who wouldn't let it go. "I practically *lived* with the team that year," he said to anyone who'd listen. "I would have known. If a starting pitcher shows up just 90 minutes before game time, I would know about it!" That cracked me up. That sort of ego. He said, too, he didn't see anything unusual about Ellis, like he's the LSD authority. That cracked me up. I might not have believed it myself except that I was there when it happened. It was my first time in LA and I wanted to make the most of it. I'm the one who put the tab on his tongue.

What people forget about Ellis or choose to not remember is that as a black player in the 70's, he wouldn't keep his damn mouth shut. Some people call him the Muhammad Ali of baseball. Jackie Robinson himself commended Ellis for his insistence that players have the right to free agency. But it wasn't always pretty for Ellis. In '72 Ellis and a few teammates missed the team bus to Riverfront Stadium in Cincinnati. When a security guard asked Ellis for identification and he tried to show his World Series ring as proof, he got maced in response. The Reds Organization official response? Sue Ellis for assault. It made him hate better, Ellis said later of the incident, and two years later, a slow-burn, when the Reds AKA "The Big Red Machine," were at the height of their dominance, Ellis attempted to hit every player in their line-

up. He hit Pete Rose, Joe Morgan, Dan Driessen, and walked Tony Perez, who managed to dodge a ball aimed at his head, before being pulled from the game.

It might seem short-sighted to go after the Reds players when it was the organization that sued him, but Ellis knew what we all knew, understood the inherent relationship between the owners and the workers. He understood that the players, especially the black ones, were the property of the team, that by going after the heroes of the Reds organization, Ellis was jeopardizing their precious investment. Who's gonna come see the Reds play if Pete Rose is on the bench? How are they gonna win games if Joe Morgan can't play? Ellis saw the way the owners set the players up on the field like chess pieces and sat back, high in their sky box, to watch them have it out. I saw it, too, from where I was standing every morning, waiting in line at the mill to punch the clock. Yeah, I was a Pittsburgh boy.

Ellis wasn't the only one going to the moon that day. I put a tab on his tongue, he put one on mine. He left so suddenly, I didn't have a chance to think to go with him, so I just sat there, in the empty apartment, and turned the game on. I watched Ellis pitch and I watched him struggle. I felt something then, a struggle of my own I've never been able to quite describe.

The Padres came to bat in long black cassocks tucked into their high socks. Richard Nixon, the home plate umpire, was wearing a collarette. When Ellis pitched, Nixon called the balls and strikes with one of his enormous pink tentacles, tentacles protruding out his ass, like he was trying to shit out an octopus. The tentacles, there must have been a dozen of them, were thick as thigh, and had these huge suckers running up and down them. Every time Ellis set at the mound and began his wind-up, those tentacles were floating right above him, waiting to strike, waiting for him to fall out of line. See, the thing is, especially back then, baseball wanted blacks to follow the rules, to stay in line, to keep the course. For a pitcher, that meant throwing strikes.

Right down the middle of the plate. Strike after strike after strike. Every time Ellis threw a ball, I saw him squirm as one of those pink suckers struck him blind. It wasn't just Nixon behind the plate. When the Pirates were at bat, it was Mr. Hornish, the foreman at the mill, who used to smack me upside the head with a rolled-up newspaper if I arrived a minute late, took eleven minutes instead of ten for my break. That wasn't all, you see. Nixon, Hornish, they wanted the same thing. They wanted Ellis to throw strikes, tip his hat, keep quiet. They wanted me to keep my mouth shut and keep the line moving. Don't make a fuss. Don't raise any objections. Don't talk pay disputes, unequal treatment. Every time Ellis threw a ball, *whip, shock*. Every time I gave Hornish the eye, *whip, shock*.

After the no-hitter, Ellis won't be the same player. He will brawl with his manager, Don Leppert, wear hair curlers on the field, call Commissioner Kuhn a racist, publicly criticize George Steinbrenner, and bean Pete Rose, again, all as a result.

Next week when I go back to work, there will be an iron fence when there wasn't before. The sky will be slate-grey, the color of unpolished steel. I'll stand outside the fence, eyeing Mr. Hornish in his oily overalls, holding his megaphone and clipboard, calmly shouting about efficiency and order. Peeking through the hole in the fence, I'll see everything in shades of black and white, almost like I was being filmed in somebody else's old movie. It'll crack me up.

#

## *Structural Bias*

**I prefer to travel alone so that I can get lost. So that I can move endlessly from place to place, staying in run-down hostels or in high-end hotels, living on boats and camping on farms, bribing my way across borders and onto the backs of freight trains, while I collect new languages and experience whole relationships in course of a single night.**

I am lost in this dream headed towards the Island of the Sun, lost somewhere between the invisible border that separates Bolivia and Peru, that separates where I have been from where I am going. On the boat, I meet Catalina, a law student from Argentina. Her travel pack is not full of clothes or comforts from home but tomb-sized law books. By way of introduction, I ask her how much of them she's read. She corrects my Spanish. I don't know Catalina any better than I know this island. I try not to think about what's waiting for me on the other side of this sun.

We land on the north shore of the island and chart our descent up to the village. The village sits up top an enormous stone staircase, littered with an army of small children, intent on selling us a shorter journey. The altitude is a mile high, and as we ascend, my lungs gasp for thin, wispy air, the type of breathing that feels like filling buckets of water with holes in the bottom. Between my two backpacks, I'm an extra one hundred pounds. I don't ask Catalina how much she's carrying. The children, though, are weightless, floating in and out of our fields of vision, taunting us from behind, then appearing six steps ahead. They ask us if we know where we are going, where we are from. They tell us their aunt or cousin or neighbor has a hostel, right around the bend, very cheap, very clean. Why not? Where are we going?

Mara asked me the same question, a month ago, when I left her apartment. We met in an New York elevator, discovered we were going to the same place, a friend of a friend's birthday,

and built something from that small, chance encounter. She was wearing a magnificent white coat, something royal that went down to her ankles, a camera around her neck. After I'd worked up some courage, I showed her some photos I'd taken while traveling. She rolled her eyes and shoved me into a cab. I told her I was leaving soon and she shrugged her shoulders. It didn't need to mean anything. But what did it mean? In my letters to her, I needed a name for our time together, so I called it transcontinental.

It's late now. The sun is starting to set and Catalina and I are on the south side of the island, far from our hostel. We are on the beach, sitting around a fire with some fellow-travelers, drinking beer and smoking cigarettes. The smoking calms my breath and for the first time all day, I don't feel my lungs gasping for air. Where are we going, where have we been? Nobody asks, nobody wants to know. Along the quiet shoreline, the fire is a fine substitute for the sun.

I'm heading back, Catalina announces, and I don't know whether I'm supposed to follow her or not, but I do. We've been walking all day. My legs are heavy, my head light. The sun sets and we lose our path back to the other side of the island, back to our hostel. We wander through the dark streets, shunned by electricity, wondering if this or that stray dog might lead us home. The mixture of exhaustion and altitude sickness portend an argument and I wonder whether I have the fluency for anger. But just as we start to point fingers, our fingers interlock, and the fear that was there before transmutes into trust. We don't have a flashlight but the small light of Catalina's phone guides us about fifteen inches a step.

We trek through a dense forest of Eucalyptus trees, no path in sight, no plan for how to resume it. But instead of worried, I just feel more lost than ever. The way I feel on a twelve-hour bus ride, on a three-day boat ride down the river. Out in the country, away from all the towers of communication, waiting at a rural station, two hours before the next train. When there's nowhere

else to go, nothing else to do. A loud part of my mind quiets then, and I feel this wonderful economy of emotion. It's like paying for something with exact change; there is nothing to spare, and all that there is pays for the present.

It's just as I settle into this calm that the forest recedes and reveals the path. Catalina breaks our grip and runs ahead to resume it. She crosses a wooden bridge and waves at me from the other side, motioning for me to hurry up and follow. Around the corner there's a store, she says, and it's open and they have wine. Why not? Where am I going?

In three months, I will fly back to New York. Mara will be waiting for me at the airport. She will be smiling at me from behind her camera lens, wearing her magnificent white coat. Her camera will collect snapshots to hang on our new fridge, three-by-four reminders of where I have been, conversation starters for cocktail parties that we will host, populated by people I will see every weekend for years to come but who will seem like strangers compared to the strangers I met on the beach, an unfamiliar breed of strange people who will ask, so, what's your five-year plan?

When I see Mara in the airport, I will have trouble believing that she is there for me. When I see that coat, I will have trouble placing it. Where was it that I saw it again?

#

*No Shelter*

**Eddie was late again. This was to be expected and normally it could be taken in stride, with good humor, smoothed over with a glass of cork wine or scotch as old as small trees, but today was not the day to be late. I'd reminded him last week and again last night when he called from the restaurant. I told him I was a little short and he didn't sound worried.**

Tonight, we're closing down the restaurant for a private event. We're trying to attract a new batch of investors. The tight restrictions placed on soil-grown food has made it difficult to bring anything grown to market. That's a problem if you own a restaurant built around that exact ethos.

Eddie's been floating a rumor he heard that one of the critics from the *Times* will be at the dinner tonight. A few kind words, something like "despite our government's insistence that farm-grown food is potentially unsafe, brothers Eddie and Geoff Rice, chef and farmer, respectively, show no signs of giving in to the fear, and give us many good reasons why we shouldn't either," would go a long way in breaking the dam. The illusion of a dam that said: the restaurant industry is changing, that restaurants should source their food from large, corporate purveyors that design and distribute Food, that the public's taste has evolved to prefer Food not food, that the Rice brother's restaurant, Roots & Rhizomes, thirty this year, would not survive the winter.

I stood outside the old brick building and tried to keep from checking my watch every five minutes. The single-story building used to be a library, built in the 30's by the CCC. A hundred years later, it was still standing. We adopted it as our unofficial headquarters after we



started getting feds at the farm, feds that wanted each individual piece of produce to be subject to new inspection protocol. The average turnaround time was two weeks, by which time, most of the produce, even if accepted as safe, would no longer be viable.

The menu for tonight was still not set. Normally, everything would come from the farm, no question, but as I'd told Eddie, I was a little short. We needed another crate of eggplants, and at least another two-dozen ears of corn, more if Eddie still wanted to do cold corn bisque for the soup. We were okay on tomatoes, so long as Eddie was making sauce. But there were no herbs to speak of, my entire garden had been wiped out overnight after a freak frost in August, and I only had about half a cow in the freezer.

Finally, two hours behind schedule, what should be an eternity in the precise and calculating mind of a chef, the R&R ORGANIX delivery truck swung into the parking lot and came to a screeching halt in front of the stone building. New brake pads, I thought, adding it to the list. The list was long and growing longer but it would be achievable and at the end of that achievement there was the future, and in that future existed the next chapter.

I whistled and pulled a pork bone from my pocket. I chucked it to the passenger side of the truck, whistled again, and waited. But when the cab door opened Frankenstein did not spring from the truck and affectionately maul me. Instead, a man in a dark navy suit and trendy, faux-leather shoes descended and nodded. The man brushed himself off and with a handkerchief in his breast pocket, gently wiped the sweat from his brow. Eddie appeared, in tow.

“You must be Geoff,” the man said, stepping forward. “I’m Olestra Wells. It’s a great honor to meet you.”

“Eddie, what’s this?” I said.

“Let’s see, all right? Hear him out,” Eddie said.

“I hear you need a little supplemental produce,” Wells said. Another guy, not one of ours, opened the back of the delivery truck. In it there were stacked crates of produce. The red peppers looked like a still life version of themselves. The zucchini was stacked and uniform. I stuck my head in to see what else there was. I didn’t smell anything.

Olestra Wells held out his corporate hand. The skin around his palms was polished and moisturized. His were hand-shaking hands, document signing hands, hands that executed orders, hands that did not callus but were themselves callous.

“I understand there’s a lot to be worked out. Believe me,” Wells went on. “We don’t expect this to harmonize overnight. But to that end, I’m here today with a gift of good-will.”

“But what is it?” I asked.

Wells dropped his hand to his side.

Eddie stepped forward in a manner that felt rehearsed. “You said it yourself, right? We’re short. What other choice do we have?”

“Smaller portions. Fewer guests. We only need to wow one person tonight, don’t we?” I said.

“She’s not coming,” Eddie said. He shook his head. “I got the call this morning. She’s not coming.”

“We’d love to discuss future partnership opportunities,” Wells said. “You will still oversee the day to day, of course. And we’ll be there, just in case.”

“Who’s we?”

“The Equinox Corporation.”

Wells whistled and a dozen men descended from the bed of the truck. Each carried a box, a bursting box of fresh produce, pre-shucked Corn, shiny rows of kernels like gold teeth,

eggplants rotund and uniform with skin like patent leather, apples that didn't oxidize, peaches that didn't bruise, cauliflower with the texture of silk and the delicate, ineffable taste of umami.

I plucked an ear of corn and split it open. Inside there was a viscous membrane like that of a winter squash. I pushed my hand through it, looking for something I might recognize as food. Equinox struck me as a strange name for a company that engineered Food, for a company whose mission it was to transcend seasons and soil and other messy tricks left for solving.

#

*When 2+1=4*

**I was sad when I woke up but for stupid reasons. I was sad because I couldn't sleep because I didn't get high and didn't have enough hours in the night to take sleeping pills and be sure I would wake up to my alarm.**

**I was sad for being a failure and for not doing the things I promised I would. The alarm, for example, which was set for nine. I thought if I could count myself present in the morning, that dubious time before noon, I might get a jumpstart on the day, you know, really take hold.** I was sad for another reason too, which throbbed and tugged at me, but which refused to reveal itself. It followed me out of the bedroom and into the kitchen where I put water on for coffee.

I was mad, too. The kitchen sink, for example, was full of dishes and food scraps. The drain was clogged again, the water gray and murky. I dove my fingers in and lifted the catcher. Some pale, warped lettuce floated up. Cigarette butts surfaced and looked like the unused life preservers on some sunk, forgotten vessel. My arm was wet to the elbow, permeated with the gentle stench of sulfur. My roommate, Anastasia, consisted almost exclusively on a diet of hard-boiled eggs. I'd made her some last night, in anticipation of her arrival, but she never showed. She was supposed to show up with treats. I was mad about that, too. She and I lived in different worlds, but recently those worlds have overlapped, had become, against my better judgment, indistinguishable.

I didn't used to be like this. I used to work a respectable job, making expensive drinks built from brilliant ratios of caffeine and sugar, didn't used to live in filth and squalor. But I had

to quit my job after Lena, my ex, left me. We worked together, so one of us had to go. I moved to 214 around the same time. 214 was owned by the same guy that owned the restaurant where I used to work (where I met my Lena and where I met Ana), so everyone on staff, present or former, seemed to have lived here at one time or another. When I asked my Lena about it, before she was my ex, she threatened her departure if I moved in. So, the sequence was out of order, but the sentiment was there. One thing led to another, I guess you could say.

The coffee timer went off and I served it in my preferred mug, which I had to wash first. My first sip, my first welcome-to-a-brand-new-day-full-of-unlimited-potential, tasted like wet sponge. I sniffed the sponge which smelled like skunk and tomato juice. I was beginning to see what was going on here. I lit another cigarette and tried to think things through.

Ana showed not much longer after that. Her hair was thin and wispy, her eyes, trying to pick up the slack, were puffed and droopy. Her irises were the color of pollution.

“Oh my god, you’ll never believe what happened last night,” she said. “You’ll never believe it.”

I nodded for her to go on. The story was about an almost-famous person she’d met on her shift last night, and how that almost-famous person had flirted with her, asked her for drinks after work. It went on from there. All I could think about were the treats and whether she had them.

“By the way, guess who else I saw last night?” Ana said.

I shook my head to save myself the strain of guessing.

“Lena.”

Last I’d heard, Lena had moved on from the restaurant industry.

“What’d she say?”

“To me? Nothing. You know how she feels about me.”

I nodded. I did know. Lena didn't like Ana because she gave me treats all the time. Lena said treats were bad for me, that they turned me into a treat-monster. When she found out I was moving in here, Lena said, "Signed, sealed, delivered." What did she mean? What had I signed over? What had I delivered?

Ana disappeared, reappeared with the missing treats from last night. She offered me some of what she had. I looked at her. She lived in a different world. It was a world she'd built all by herself, and only she could say who could live there, too. If she invited you, fine, but if she didn't, you could fuck off. Last night, I'd wanted more than anything to live in there with her. Not just last night, either. Every night. It seemed then that all I'd been trying to do since I'd moved in here was live in that little artificial world with Ana. I didn't even want to sleep with her, either. That was the scary part. She took up some of the treat and I watched as her pupils dilated. The pollution dissipated, sucked up by some giant vacuum. Her eyes looked like the tiny porcelain people that live in snow-globes.

I wanted Ana's treats. I didn't want to keep relying on her for treats. I didn't want more treats. One more, maybe, but then that was it. I would stop today. Tomorrow. First thing Monday morning. Ana looked at me expectedly. She wasn't used to my ambivalence, my flimsy show of resistance.

"Hold on," I said.

She groaned. She took some more treat for herself and groaned some more.

I went outside to get some air. I sat on the porch that was the same porch of every other dwelling in the condo park. I held my phone up to the air. I had full signal, but was holding out for something more.

Automatically, I started to dial Ana's number even though I wanted Lena. I tried again, but this time wrote a message. I stood there, waiting to be read. In the distance a train passed, and then another, headed in opposite directions. I would have been fine with either one.

#

*One Size Fits All*

**High in the country, high into the planting season, the drones took to the sky. And though it was late in the planting season, the sky turned from pale gray to full blue, the soil defrosted and mellowed to a warm, porous grain, the harvest seeds spread and sown, the hive bees awake in frenzy, the drones were not late in their arrival. Theirs was a programmed arrival, and it was an arrival born of calculation and precision by the secret minds of secret scientists whose only purpose was to execute this arrival and in this they did not fail.**

The drones appeared in the sky like a thousand-flock of geese gathered and caged and released all at once. So that before there was nothing, the sky empty but for seafoam clouds and the marine blue of high spring, and then, without warning, black, an explosion of small beads, thickening drops of ink blotter streaking across the sky.

There was traffic after that, traffic all through the sky, a traffic unseen in the high country, a traffic borrowed from the future of distant cities and in this it was infectious, and in this, it was meant to convert. And the farmers who believed themselves unconvertible, who spent endless hours appearing before committees and courts and congresses to defend their right not to convert, were in the end, converted. The farmers who believed themselves endowed with the right to decide the fate of their land—it was their land, and before that their parents, and before that their grandparents—believed they who would decide whether to convert or not. But the secret minds of the secret scientists knew one better, they knew that the land, once converted, could not be changed back, would no longer belong to the farmers, but to the masters of conversion.



Like bees, the drones swarmed. Like bees, swarming inside the hive like a frenzy of chaos, only that underneath that chaos there is formation, delegated roles and flight-patterns known only by the hive, so, too, the drones swarmed.

The first formation was charged with seed deployment. The new breed of seeds that did not wither from the heat of the sun, or wilt from drought, or perish from the potent cocktail of pesticides, that could withstand any hardship so long as there was sun and the nourishment of synthesized chemicals, fell from the sky and drowned the harvest seeds. The harvest seeds struggled against the conquest of the new seeds, and the harvest seeds might have won because they were venerable, bred for superiority from the soul of the seed, but for the deluge that was forthcoming.

The second formation drowned the fields in this deluge, an ocean of pesticides, and it was a chemical cocktail that no plant could withstand, no plant but the new breed of seeds which were bred, not from the soul of the seed, but by the secret minds of the secret scientists, with a peculiar and clinical immunity. And yet the final formation might have rescued the chemical-soaked, self-eradicating harvest seeds, for it was fertilizer, and fertilizer, both natural and synthetic, is the nectar of the all plants, whether born of natural Mother or clever human hand. But the fertilizer that fell from the formation and glazed the sky in a hazy, mustard mist was designed but for one mouth, and that was the mouth of the new breed of seeds, and should the mouth of any other seed seek from it its nectar a beguiling venom lay in wait.

And the farmers who wondered what to make of this new peculiar species proliferated overnight across their ancestor's acres and did not lay long in wonder. Before they could figure at their converted land, a land that yesterday hosted an abundance of crops, each crop different, each species a sub-species, each cultivar bred new into existence, was today a multitude reduced

to one, not one crop or one species or one cultivar but one: every new sown seed genetically identical to the next, a green blanket uniform in size and shape and sustenance that spread across the land. After, an army of armored cars carrying corporate agents arrived to inform the farmers of their conversion. The farmers believed themselves part of their land, and their land part of them, they believed themselves free to break this earthly contract, and now that the land was converted and not sown of harvest seeds but sown of new seeds bred from the secret minds of the secret scientists they were want to break it.

But the land once broken could not be turned back. The corporate agents informed the farmers in terms that farmers could not comprehend. The new breed of seeds, bred with immunity to the special pesticides, bred for sustenance to the special fertilizer carried a cost greater than the farmers could then comprehend. Money in research and development, money in the greasing of government officials, money in the secret minds of secret scientists, money in deafening, ubiquitous public relation campaigns, and that money would be raised by the farmers and paid to the corporate agents and the land was not theirs, nor that of their parents or grandparents, for it was converted land, and in that conversion it was corporate land, and in that it was corporate land, the farmers were corporate agents, under contract by force of law and litigation.

The next year, the drones returned, appeared in the sky, and their arrival was, by the farmers estimations, early. The ground was a hard frost. The sky was slate. The streams and lakes and rivers were suspended. There was nothing to do in that season but wait for the sun. But the drones did not need care for these considerations. Wet, dry, cold, hot, these were ancient concerns.

The farmers sat inside and waited, waited for the sun, waited for the thaw, waited for the land to ask again for their flawed but human input and they are long in waiting.

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