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Eastern European Cartoons

Huxley Bupkins's Execution

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Huxley Bupkins's heart beats like that of a copulating rabbit. Its pace increases and becomes uneven as he grows anxious, burrowing deep into the metal chair with inhuman scratches on its armrests, afraid that the clerk will be late again and the appointment will have to be rescheduled for another week or perhaps a month (!), for having a slot booked in such a busy time of the year, time of the personal growth assessment, is impossible or, in case one wanted to book it through an agent, would cost the one a few hundred lucres ("Subject to dynamic tariffs, damn them..."). Meanwhile, acid pink rabbits with happy mugs round-dance amidst the flowery fields painted on the room's yellow walls, which doesn't infuse any calmness into the atmosphere; on the contrary, it's palpable, it's stinks of death, as a successful crime novelist would have written.

The door screeches and the rabbits stop dancing and hide behind the flowers. A young clerk with quite virgin moustache enters the room. In his hands is a document folder with coffee-stained pages; the same stains decorate his wrinkled shirt. His breath held, Huxley watches the clerk approaching a metal desk in front of him.

—I'm so sorry for being late. You can't imagine what a day it has been,—says the clerk, drops the folder onto the desk and starts frantically searching for a pen.—Mrs Takoushi has fired three people today. Luckily... Oh, goodness. I'm such a duffer but... do you have a pen?

—A pen?—Huxley swallows.—What pen?

—Just a pen, preferably blue ink, or black, but not red. Not allowed.

Huxley probes his shirt's pockets.

—I... I have a pencil.

—No, a pencil? Don't be silly, mister. I need a pen; you can't fill the documents with a pencil, can you? But well, whom am I even saying this to?

—Bupkins, Huxley Bupkins.

—Ha-ha, good joke. That's probably why you're here.

—It's not a joke. It's my name. Bupkins.

—I know what your name is. I mean... anyway, whom am I even saying this to... Documents with a pencil... How bizarre. Should we fill documents with a pencil, whither would it have gotten us? A total disaster, indeed a total disaster, Mr Bubkins.

—It's Bupkins.

—I know what your name is. You don't have to repeat it to me. I've read your case twice. Do you think I'm that incompetent? In all honesty, Mr Bubkins, I'm a bit clumsy and not a world expert in this—not yet at least—but hearing this from someone like you? Oh, spare me, Mr Bubkins.

—It's with a "p".

—I'm afraid you have to hold it a little longer; we don't have a toilet here, Mr Bubkins, not in this room. You won't need it in a couple of minutes anyway, will you?

—Won't I?

—No, you won't, I'm pretty sure of that. I've read the manual. That, in fact, was my exam question.

The clerk gets down on all fours and crawls under the desk, hitting his head a couple of times.

—Holy Mother, where's that pen...

—Are you sure you don't need a pencil? I sharpen it every morning.

—I'm pretty sure I don't need a pencil, Mr Bubkins, regardless of how sharp it is.

—You could rub it out later and fill it out with your pen, couldn't you? I'm in a bit of a rush.

—Are you? Do you have other things to do afterwards? Ah-ha! Here it is, little bastard.

Huxley flinches as the clerk jumps from under the desk with a shiny metallic pen in his hands, a madman grin stretching his virgin moustache sparse. He sits in front of Huxley Bupkins and starts laying out documents on the desk, mumbling something in Legalese.

—Alrighty, here we go. Shall we proceed?

Huxley nods.

—Do you have any famous last words to say?

—Last words? No, I have none.

The clerk appears confused, nay disappointed. He looks at Huxley, at his documents, at a field prompting "Last words (optional)". His pen sticks into the empty field and awaits further instructions.

—None at all? I thought, nay hoped, you'd have something meaningful to say. There's plenty of room for anything; one could fit a novel here.

—Nothing I would have on top of my mind.

—Nothing bothers you? You look nervous.

—Am I?

—Yes, quite so. Anything you'd like to get off your chest? You can

pretend I'm a priest.

—Not really. I've had it rescheduled two times. I just want to be done with it. I'm tired.

—Just to confirm. You understand that this is an execution, don't you?

—I do understand, yes.

—And you are about to be executed.

—Yes, you've just told me that.

—Do you know what execution means?

—I'm not sure.

—You are not sure?

—Well, I thought I was, but you sound like I wasn't. So, no, not really.

—And what did you think it was?

—A reprimand of sorts?

—I suppose one could see it like that, yes.

—I know my score hasn't been very high lately...

—Oh-ho-ho, it is very not very high, to put it mildly, but just enough to be executed.

—What does it mean then?

—That means you're going to be dead.

A protracted pause pulsates through the room; even Huxley's heart misses a few beats. His mouth becomes dry and the speaking valve in his throat grows stiff. He gulps and utters:

—Dead?

—Yes.

—Oh...

—Do you know what that means?

Huxley doesn't answer. His heart speeds up, coming round for the last lap, as the awed rabbits on the walls gamblingly watch the scene unfolding.

—Like dead-dead?—Huxley asks with a quiet voice.

—Indeed, deadly dead I'm afraid.

—But that's not good, is it?

—No, it's usually not good.

—"Usually"? What circumstances would make it "good"?

—Well, considering what you did, it's, as they say, "fair".

—Who says that?

—Who says what?

—You said “as they say”. Who are they?

—It’s just a figure of speech. The society, I guess.

—Ah, the society...—says Huxley, engrossed in meaningless nodding,—the society...

—Yes, the law.

—And the law, too?

—Correct. Those two work together. If one fails, another one has his back.

—And what happens next?

—When?

—After you execute me.

—You will be dead, as I said.

—I mean, what happens to me when I am dead?

The executioneer stalls, an answering thought stirring in his head to no avail.

—That's above my pay grade, I'm afraid.

—Aren't you supposed to know those things?

—I'm just a junior executioneer. I hate to admit that, but my job, for now at least, is simple and is to read you the verdict and press this green button. This one, see?—as he says it, he strokes a large, cup-sized button attached to the desk.

—Then you're terrible at your job, I hate to admit, because you haven't done anything required from you yet.

—Oh, spare me, Mr Bubkins. I'm the one with the button, not you.

—How can you not know what happens after you press the button? Haven't you executed anyone before?

Silent, the executioneer scratches his ear.

—No, actually.

—Huh?

—That's, well, my first day.

—And still, you must know what happens to people after you off them.

—I don't think I must.

—Unbelievable. Well, then I must know before we proceed. I don't like the sound of it—"dead". It sounds rather creepy, doesn't it?

—It does. But thus is the life. And the law.

—I demand you call someone who knows.

The executioneer's eye twitches, once, twice, many times. Skin on his head creeps back and his ears become pink.

—I'm not calling anyone.

—I'm worried you can't execute me correctly.

—I can, that's easy. As I said, I click this green button and it's done.

—But you don't even know what happens when I'm dead.

—You're a goner, and I go and grab a fresh cuppa.

—But what happens to me?

—I told you it's above my pay grade.

—I don't believe you! That sounds like the most basic thing you should know. I won't tell you anything, no last words, nothing, I won't do anything, until you tell me what happens to me when I'm dead. Or I'll file a complaint!

Arms crossed, Huxley averts his gaze towards the farther corner of the room. His leg starts shaking on its own.

—Alright-alright... Calm down. Holy mother...

After the rotary dial cracks four times, the telephone beeps and erupts connection noises.

—Mrs Takoushi, It's Dave. May I ask a question? ... I know you're busy... Yes... Yes... No, of course not, Mrs Takoushi... It's about my first task... I know... Yes... Yes... Yes, well, actually no... No, he's asking me... No, I'm not being manipulated... Yes... I know, Mrs Takoushi... Yes, I read the manual... Okay... Okay... I will check... Please, don't call my mum... No, I promise... Got it... Can I please not repeat it?.. Okay, "I will study the manual better if I don't want to get fired on my first day like a totally incompetent moronic nincompoop"... I got it... Yes I did that... Erm... I don't know, I'm sorry...

Loud "unbelievable" screeches on the other end of the line followed by beeps. The agitated executioneer puts the telephone down.

—What did Mrs Takoushi say?

—None of your business.

—Look it up in the manual, I heard it.

—You're not manipulating me.

Separated by thin tension they stare at each other, no word said, but the executioneer gives up and, puffing and panting, pulls out a huge volume from a drawer and drops it on the desk so every item on it bounces. Having given Huxley a darkly suspicious look, he starts skimming through the manual's pages.

—Okay... Here... So... No, not that one... Oh, really?... No... No... No again... Ah, yes, here it is!

The faint flows of Legalese ooze from the executioneer's mouth as he frowns and wrinkles. Huxley stretches out his long neck, leaning slightly across the table.

—What is it?

The executioneer clicks his tongue.

—So it says, "In accordance with prevailing philosophical and scientific viewpoints, the cessation of biological function, commonly known as death, results in a nullification of sensory perception, cognitive faculties, and individual subjective experiences. Consequently, post-mortem existence is characterised by an absence of any form of activity, consciousness, or experiential phenomena."

—What does that mean? I don't get it.

—So, as far as I understand, nothing's popping off after you're dead. Nothing.

—Nothing?

—Yeah, kind of weird. I thought there's something at least, but yeah—nothing at all.

—How is it going to happen then?

—What?

—Nothing. If it's nothing, how is it supposed to happen? I mean, it's nothing, isn't it? It can't happen. How can nothing happen if it's nothing?

The executioneer clears his throat.

—All the manual says is that you are going to be terminally dead and that's it.

—I don't think I understand.

—Do you remember what happened to you before you were born?

—Hmm...—Huxley moans, pondering the question, smacking his lips and showing other attributes of heavy thinking.—Not really.

—Exactly! See? So after you die, I reckon it's the same thing. You won't feel anything, probably, so it doesn't matter if nothing or something happens after that. The manual says that, anyway. It's like a second birthday.

—Ah okay. That clears it up.

Both the executee and the executioneer seem to have cheered up.

—Really?—doubts the executioneer.

—Yes, thank you.

—You're welcome,—he sighs with relief.—Shall we continue?

—I don't think I have a choice, to be honest.

—Spot on, mister. Neither do I. Such is work.

—Such is life, yes.

—I wouldn't say such a grand thing but... Anyway, where were we? Ah, yes. Do you have anything to say before the execution?

—Actually, I was thinking, can I make a call?

—Yes, there's a checkbox for that. You surely can. Who would you like to call?

—My cat, Dinger.

Befuddled, the executioneer looks at Huxley from under his brows.

—No, I'm afraid we can't allow that.

—Are you sure?

—I'm pretty sure one cannot call their cat. What a nonsense.

—Does the manual say that? That it's a nonsense?

—The manual says the executee can call one close other, be it a friend or family.

—Does it say I can't call my cat?

—It... I'd assume it includes only humans.

—You assume? But it doesn't say it precisely, "only humans" and "no cats", does it? Dinger is my closest other, my family; I don't really have anyone else to call.

—A call is optional; if you don't have anyone else, of which I'm really sorry to hear, you don't have to use it, moreso use it to call your cat.

—I'm not saying you should, but is there any chance you could check it in the manual? It is what, a thousand pages? It must have something about pets.

—I doubt such a silly thing would be specified in the manual. It's a serious document.

—But can you check? What if it's there? Wouldn't you be fired for refusing me a close other call?

An uncertain irritation slimes across the executioneer's face in the form of blushing.

—No, it cannot be there.

—Are you sure?

—I am sure,—the executioneer says but stops himself abruptly.—I guess.

—If you're not sure, maybe you should call Mrs Takoushi and ask?

The executioneer throws an angry look, though his anger appears as childish irritation. No words uttered, he opens up the manual again and flips through the index pages.

—No, it's not here. The index doesn't mention cats at all.

—Does it mention pets in general?

—Hmm... No, only petrol... petards... *petite*... Nothing about "pet". I'm sorry, you can't call your cat.

—Well, that's a shame.

—So, do you have anything to say? Last words?

—No, thank you, I'm fine.

He's not, in fact, fine at all. Any remnants of fineness start an exodus from his body, his blood sugar have been plummeting to critical levels, and all-engulfing dark spots now cover his sight, leaving him alone, completely isolated inside his mind with nobody but himself and thoughts of his little fluffy cat Dinger ("My dear demonette..."), whose image, a vision Huxley always keeps in a mind compartment with his most precious memories, suddenly began to meow pitifully, as if it were the cat about to be executed, not its owner, who, seeing this scene unfolding within the narrowing vignette, begins to sob.

The executioneer, upon seeing Huxley melting, knows nothing of what to do in such a poignant situation and is only able to open his mouth, attempting to empathise, erroneously, and gesticulate with his hands as if trying to calm an uncontrollably growing fire.

—What's the matter?—he asks in a low gentle voice.

—Nothing... it's... erm... just, I'm... well... I thought... but then... never mind. I've realised... Or rather... It came to me suddenly.

—What did?

—Dinger... I... and she—it's not about me anymore—she, my little furry demonette will never...

—See you again?—adds the executioneer after a short pause.

The words, a hand taking the wrong piece from a fragile Jenga tower, cause collapse to Huxley's mental state. He gives up and begins to wail at full volume, splashing tears, which, despite his attempts to plug his eyes with his hands, gush like fountains in all directions. The event terrifies the executioneer, for he can't stand tears, moreover tears from his executee, his first executee. He glances at the manual, at Huxley, at the rabbits scared shitless on the walls, and at the telephone, looks around, hesitates, while Huxley is wailing, flooding the table and documents with the saltiest, bitterest tears.

—Here. Take it. The telephone. You can call her.

Barely breathing, his eyes red as insomnia, Huxley examines the executioneer.

—Call her. I won't tell anyone.

—I... I... can you dial the number? My hands... I can't...—mumbles Huxley with his hands shaking.

The executioneer takes the telephone and waits for the number. Eyes closed, Huxley massages his temples.

—Zero... Three... Three... Another Three... Five... Zero... Two... No... Can you start again? Zero, three, three, three, five, zero, one, two.

Connective beeps follow.

—Meow?—says Huxley into the telephone receiver.—Meoauw... Me... Meow... Meauw?

Eyes orbing, limbs frozen, the executioneer listens to Huxley meowing into the telephone receiver and Dinger meowing back.

—Meow... Meauww... Meauw.. Me-me... Mew-auw.. meow-meow... Meow... Meaw? Oof.. Meauw, meow, me-meow... Meaough... Meow...

The executioneer starts chewing his metal pen, which is a bad idea given it's made of metal, yet so he does for two minutes.

—Meow... Meowww...

Dinger purrs, the air in the room vibrates, Huxley, smiling and sobbing, hangs up.

—Is everything alright? Oh, sorry, that's a stupid question, isn't it? I hope you had a sweet last chat.

In response, Huxley only nods, wipes the tears with a sleeve of his shirt and breathes out.

—I'm ready. You can push the button.

—Do you have any last words to say?

—I do not.

—Anything to your close other?

—I've said everything to her. I just want this to end. Whatever I say would be my last words anyway. If you need it that much, you can write it down.

—I actually don't need it. It's optional.

Huxley glared at the executioneer, immediately averting his gaze.

—Alrighty, then shall I read the verdict?

—You shall. Read it already.

—Alrighty...—the executioneer clears his throat, straightens his back and in a declarative voice of a news presenter, commences his

speech.—"In line with the societal mandate established under Governance Protocol GX-1001, Subsection 12.3, tagged as 'The Directive for Maintaining Social Utility,' Huxley Bubkins is formally sentenced to immediate termination. The conviction arises from the quantifiable offence of 'Failing to Show Adequate Personal Growth and Add Value To Society.' Following a meticulous scrutiny of Huxley's life achievements, skills, social interactions, and overall contributions, the Individual Growth Metric system has determined a score of 42, which falls below the mandated minimum threshold of 50. As a consequence, it is the Council of Social Utility's irrevocable judgement that Huxley Bubkins is not worthy of continued resource allocation. Execution will be carried out forthwith, in adherence to procedure ZX-7 of the Executioneer's Operational Handbook." How does that sound?

—It's all wrong.

—Huh? How so?

—It's Bupkins, with a "p", I told you.

—What?

—It's "Bup-kins". You got that one wrong again.

The executioneer gulps, red rash runs across his cheek.

—Aren't you Huxley Bubkins?

—I am, but with a "p". Bup-kins. The sound is soft. Goes like a "pop".

The executioneer blinks many times as he flips through the documents.

—“Pop”... Uh-huh. Hmmm. Well, it says Bub-kins, though. With a “b”. Must be just a typo.

—And my social value score is 49, not 42. I called in the service a few days ago.

—Uh-huh?

—Uh-huh.

—Well, our numbers often come with a bit of a delay. Are you sure you haven’t done anything that would bring it down to 42 lately?

—No, I was on holiday in Barnsley for a week, lying on a beach.

—Ah, that’s probably the reason. It usually goes down like that, you should’ve checked your score before going on holiday.

—No, I don’t think that’s the case. It’s all wrong. My name. My score. Everything. It’s all wrong. I can’t accept it like that...

—Well, this is what documents say. I’m just an executioneer, Mr Bubkins, I don’t calculate your score, other people do.

—It’s with a “p”!

—I’m sorry, mister. I’m sorry.

An irritating pause occurs in the conversation, as the executioneer and

the executee examine each other. Nervous, the executioneer clicks his pen.

—I would advise calling Mrs Takoushi, just in case.

—I don't think it would be necessary. She handed me the documents.

—But you wouldn't want to get fired on your first day, would you? I heard that it lowers social value scores quite a bit...

They stare at each other, waiting to see who makes the next move.

—Just to make sure,—says the executioneer as he reaches for the telephone.—But you're not manipulating me.

—It's just you being a responsible professional.

—Right.

The rotary dial cracks multiple times, giving birth to beeps.

—Mrs Takoushi, I hope you're doing well... No, it's Dave again. Hello... Yes... No... Not yet, I have a question about that exactly. I thought your expertise and wisdom would be of great help... Lovely, Mrs Takoushi... So, Mr Bubkins says that he's actually Huxley Bup-kins, not Bub-kins... Yes, with a "p", you got that one right. Like a "pop"... Yes... Oh... Really? Fine, that is lovely... One more thing, though... He says that his value score is 49 and not 42 how we have it... Oh, well... Of course, Mrs Takoushi... Brilliant... Thank you very much.

With cheerful confidence, the executioneer hangs up.

—What did she say?

—She said to execute you anyway because 49 is still lower than 50, which is a minimum acceptable threshold for the Individual Growth Metric.

—That's a shame. But that's just one point away from the threshold...—says Huxley, sad and given up.

—Not from the right side, though, is it?

—I suppose it is not...

—The rules are the rules, as they... Khm-khm. The law is to make our lives easier, isn't it.

—I suppose it is...

The executioneer takes a deep breath.

—So you're good to go! Set and ready.

—I don't know what to say anymore.

—Yes, I'm sorry. Mine was 51 for quite a while—what a stress.

—What about my name?

—What about it?

—It has a “p” in it and not “b” how you have it written.

—Well, apparently, that doesn’t matter. Those things happen. Some people do it deliberately to avoid the procedure, which I hope you didn’t do. We’ll add it in “the alternative spellings” and be done with it.

—You can do such a thing?

—That’s what Mrs Takoushi said.

—Then I guess, I’m a goner.

—Unfortunately, that’s the case.

—Can you read the thing one more time?

—The manual says the verdict is read once.

—But just to check if anything’s in place and ready to go. It won’t hurt for your probation either. I’m not trying to manipulate you. Just a bit of accuracy is always good, isn’t it?

—No doubt in that, mister,—says the executioneer approvingly, and prepares to read the verdict.

—But this time could you read it with a “p”. Please?

—Alrighty, I’ll try, khm-khm... “In line with the societal mandate established under Governance Protocol GX-1001, Subsection 12.3, tagged as ‘The Directive for Maintaining Social Utility,’ Huxley

Bup-kins is formally sentenced to immediate termination. The conviction arises from the quantifiable offence of 'Failing to Show Adequate Personal Growth and Add Value To Society.' Following a meticulous scrutiny of Huxley's life achievements, skills, social interactions, and overall contributions, the Individual Growth Metric system has determined a score of 42, which falls below the mandated minimum threshold of 50. As a consequence, it is the Council of Social Utility's irrevocable judgement that Huxley Bup-kins is not worthy of continued resource allocation. Execution will be carried out forthwith, in adherence to procedure ZX-7 of the Executioneer's Operational Handbook." All good now?

Tears well in Huxley's capillaried eyes.

—Yes, it sounds lovely. Almost blissfully so.

—Lovelt it is then, I'm pressing the button.

—Go on. Thank you for being my executioneer.

—You're always welcome, Mr Bup-kins.

Huxley Bupkins screws up his eyes and tenses every muscle in his body, while the executioneer places his hand on the button. Huxley's heart stops and a languid, deep, indescribable silence follows, which, nevertheless, soon ends, the pulse of the executed man recovers, his muscles relax, but he's still afraid to open his eyes.

—Am I... dead?

—No, I forgot one thing.

—You scared the shit out of me!

—I'm sorry, okay? I got nervous.

He hands out a page with copious letters forming words in Legalese and Huxley, his hands trembling, takes it.

—You have to sign this as well.

—What is it?

—"Terminal Consent and Acknowledgment Form", just a quick signature.

—Shouldn't I read it first?

—Nobody really reads them as far as I know.

—Well, I do, always do.

—Oh, it won't be necessary this time.

—Just in case I find any typos,—Huxley says, frowning, takes the consent form and starts reading.—"Terminal Consent and Acknowledgement Form. Clause 1: I, the undersigned, Huxley Bupkins, confirm that I have been informed and understand the reasoning behind my immediate termination, as specified under Governance Protocol GX-1001, Subsection 12.3, which outlines my

failure to meet the requisite Individual Growth Metric. Clause 2: I forgo any rights of appeal and grant permission for immediate execution. Clause 3: I acknowledge that my post-termination entity shall have no rights or claims to any assets, intellectual or otherwise, and my digital footprint will be wiped clean from all databases. Clause 5: By signing below, I affirm my understanding and acceptance of all aforementioned clauses, consigning to the fact that this document has been comprehended to the fullest extent."—he pauses, thinking.—Yeah, I guess that's about right.

—Lovely. Just a quick signature here please.

The executioneer gives the pen to Huxley and he signs.

—Congratulations!

—With what?

The executioneer blushes again, his eye twitching.

—I don't know. I just felt like saying it. You're officially ready to be executed.

—Don't mess it up this time please. Or I'll leave a bad review.

—I doubt you will.

Huxley Bubkins shakes his head.

—Alright, I'm pressing the button. Goodbye Mr Bubkins.

—It's "p", like a "pop".

The green button clicks. The heartbeat ends with a pop and no chance to return. Silence, long, stretching like a chewing gum, ensues.

> *This story is my submission to the the Soaring Twenties Social Club** (STSC) Symposium. The STSC is a small, exclusive online speakeasy where a dauntless band of raconteurs, writers, artists, philosophers, flaneurs, musicians, idlers, and bohemians share ideas and companionship. Each month STSC members create something around a set theme. This cycle, the theme was "Growth."

If you are a writer, you might *consider joining us*.*

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