

# Propaganda Propaganda

*A Novel*

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# **Propaganda Propaganda**

## **Chapter One — The Packet**

### *Scene One*

The office on a Tuesday morning in October.

Bungler arrived at eight forty-seven. He hung up his coat. He made himself coffee from the machine on the counter, which produced something that was technically coffee when he made it and something that was technically not coffee when anyone else tried. He sat at his desk. He opened his notebook. He wrote the date at the top of a fresh page.

Laugher arrived at nine-oh-three laughing at something that had happened on the stairs. He attempted to explain it. The explanation made him laugh harder. The harder laughing made the explanation impossible. He sat at his desk. He straightened his tie. He achieved composure for approximately four seconds.

Solver was already there. She had been there since seven-thirty. She had made the coffee, read the Gazette front to back, opened the mail, and done three things that Bungler would take credit for before the morning was out. She was at her desk by the door, which was where her desk had been since 1974.

The post arrived at nine-fifteen.

Solver sorted it. Bills. A circular. One envelope with no return address, hand-delivered rather than posted, heavier than it looked. She put it on Bungler's desk without comment.

Bungler looked at it. He looked at the handwriting on the front. He looked at Laugher.

He opened it.

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*Scene Two*

Inside the envelope: two folded notes and a stack of bills. One hundred dollar bills, counted into a neat pile.

Bungler unfolded the first note. It was typed. He read it aloud.

The problem is in this day and age as soon as I turn around and say I'm on this side of this issue automatically everyone will then only listen to me if I'm on the same side as them and really I believe one of the things we need to do is we need to start to work at becoming less polarized and this means we need to be more curious about the other side and try to understand different points of view so while I have my own point of view and perspective I also respect the fact that other people have a very different way of thinking than I do and that doesn't necessarily make them wrong it doesn't necessarily make them bad it doesn't necessarily make them evil it just means that they have a different story that they're telling themselves about what should happen about how the world should be so for me I really want to be someone who helps you to understand why we tell the stories to ourselves that we do.

He put it down.

He said: this person seems very reasonable.

Laugher laughed. Not at anything specific. At the feeling of it.

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*Scene Three*

Bungler unfolded the second note. This one was handwritten. He read it aloud.

Propaganda Propaganda. Rhetorical Strategies. Ethos. Arete. Phronesis. Anaphora. Hyperbole. Logical Fallacies. False Dilemma. Slippery Slope. Ad Hominem. Mystery. Call to Action.

He put it down.

He said: list.

Laughter said: poem.

Bungler said: it is clearly a list. Each item is a separate item. Items constitute a list.

Laughter said: each line stands alone. Lines that stand alone constitute a poem.

Bungler said: there is no meter. There is no rhyme.

Laughter said: there is no meter or rhyme in a great deal of poetry.

Bungler said: name one.

Laughter named several. Bungler disputed each one. The argument continued for some time and did not resolve. It would not resolve. It was the kind of argument that could not resolve because both positions were correct and neither man was wrong and both men knew this and neither would say so.

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#### *Scene Four*

There was a third note folded inside the envelope with the money. Bungler found it when he lifted the bills. He unfolded it. He read it aloud.

I am eighteen years old. My parents gave me this money to hire a private detective to find out who the villain is. Academia? Public health? Media? Finance? I chose you by random.

Silence.

Laughter said: boy.

Bungler said: girl.

Laughter said: the note does not specify.

Bungler said: the handwriting specifies.

Laugher said: handwriting does not specify gender.

Bungler said: in my experience it does.

Laugher said: name one case where the handwriting told you the gender.

Bungler opened his notebook. He looked at it. He closed it.

Laugher laughed.

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*Scene Five*

Bungler said: villain.

Laugher said: client.

Bungler said: no legitimate client is anonymous. No legitimate client sends cash. No legitimate client is eighteen years old spending their parents' money.

Laugher said: no legitimate villain hires a detective to investigate themselves.

Bungler said: we do not know they are investigating themselves.

Laugher said: we do not know anything. That is the point.

Bungler said: the point is that we cannot take a case without knowing who we are working for.

Laugher said: the point is that we do not know if this is a case at all.

Bungler said: what else would it be.

Laugher had no answer to that. Neither did Bungler. They sat with the question. The question did not resolve. It would not resolve for a long time.

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*Scene Six*

Bungler picked up the first note again. The typed one. He read it silently this time. He said: this is a positioning statement. The person is placing themselves in the center. Above the argument. Neither side.

Laugher said: or they are actually reasonable.

Bungler said: how do you tell the difference.

Laugher said: you cannot.

Bungler wrote in his notebook: how do you tell the difference. He looked at what he had written. He said: that is either the beginning of the investigation or the whole of it.

Laugher said: both.

Bungler said: yes. Both.

He picked up the second note. The handwritten one. He said: and this lists the strategies by which the first note operates.

Laugher said: or it lists the tools of the investigation.

Bungler said: same thing.

Laugher said: no. A weapon and a tool are not the same thing.

Bungler said: they are frequently the same object.

Laugher said: yes. Frequently.

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### *Scene Seven*

Bungler said: we cannot take a case from an anonymous client. It is a matter of professional ethics. We do not know who is employing us. We do not know what we are being employed to find. We do not know if the finding will be used for legitimate purposes. We have a typed note, a handwritten list, a third note from an eighteen year old, and a sum of money we cannot account for. We cannot take this case.

Laugher said: we already have.

Bungler said: we have not agreed to anything.

Laugher said: we opened the envelope.

Bungler said: opening an envelope is not a contractual agreement.

Laughter said: we read the notes.

Bungler said: reading notes is not a contractual agreement.

Laughter said: we are sitting here arguing about whether to take the case.

Bungler said: yes.

Laughter said: people who are not taking a case do not argue about whether to take it. They put it back in the envelope and return it to sender.

Bungler said: there is no return address.

Laughter said: exactly.

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### *Scene Eight*

Bungler counted the money. Laughter counted it after him. They agreed on the amount.

Bungler put the money in his desk drawer. He said: we cannot return it. There is no address. We cannot take the case without knowing more. We cannot know more without beginning to investigate. We cannot investigate without taking the case.

Laughter said: yes.

Bungler opened his notebook. He turned to a fresh page. He wrote: Propaganda Propaganda — Case One. He underlined it twice.

He looked at the three notes laid out on his desk. The typed manifesto. The handwritten list. The third note from the eighteen year old who had chosen them by random.

He said: academia, public health, media, finance. Four worlds. One question. A deadline we do not know yet.

Laughter said: the note does not mention a deadline.

Bungler said: there is always a deadline.

He was right about that.

# **Propaganda Propaganda**

## **Chapter Two — The Notes**

### *Scene One*

The next morning Bungler arrived at eight forty-nine. He hung up his coat. He did not make coffee. He went directly to his desk and picked up the typed note and read it again.

The problem is in this day and age as soon as I turn around and say I'm on this side of this issue automatically everyone will then only listen to me if I'm on the same side as them and really I believe one of the things we need to do is we need to start to work at becoming less polarized and this means we need to be more curious about the other side and try to understand different points of view so while I have my own point of view and perspective I also respect the fact that other people have a very different way of thinking than I do and that doesn't necessarily make them wrong it doesn't necessarily make them bad it doesn't necessarily make them evil it just means that they have a different story that they're telling themselves about what should happen about how the world should be so for me I really want to be someone who helps you to understand why we tell the stories to ourselves that we do.

He put it down. He waited for Laughter.

Laughter arrived at nine-oh-four laughing at the stairs. He sat down. He looked at Bungler. He stopped laughing.

Bungler said: I want to talk about the notes.

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*Scene Two*

Bungler said: read it again.

Laugher read it. When he finished he said: I believe one of the things we need to do is we need to start to work at becoming less polarized.

Bungler said: yes.

Laugher said: that is a reasonable position.

Bungler said: it is presented as a reasonable position.

Laugher said: you think there is a difference.

Bungler said: I think the presentation of reasonableness is a strategy.

Laugher said: or the person is reasonable and is saying so.

Bungler said: how do you tell the difference.

Laugher said: you said that yesterday.

Bungler said: I am saying it again because it is still the question.

Laugher looked at the note. He said: I'm on this side of this issue. What side. They do not say what side.

Bungler said: no.

Laugher said: so the reasonableness is positioned without content. Without a position.

Bungler said: yes.

Laugher said: that is either very clever or genuinely humble.

Bungler said: yes.

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*Scene Three*

Bungler said: the person says they want to help you understand why we tell the stories to ourselves that we do. That is a call to action. It positions the writer as the guide. The reader as the one who needs guiding.

Laugher said: or it is a genuine offer of help.

Bungler said: it can be both.

Laugher said: most things can be both.

Bungler said: that is the problem.

Laugher said: or the point.

Bungler said: what do you mean.

Laugher said: if most things can be both then the question of whether something is a strategy or a genuine expression is not answerable from the outside. You would need to know the intention. You cannot know the intention. So the question cannot be answered.

Bungler said: and yet we have been hired to answer it.

Laugher said: we have been hired to find the villain.

Bungler said: yes.

Laugher said: perhaps the villain is the unanswerable question.

Bungler wrote this in his notebook. He looked at it. He said: that is either very profound or completely useless.

Laugher said: both.

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#### *Scene Four*

Bungler picked up the handwritten list. He read it aloud again.

Propaganda Propaganda. Rhetorical Strategies. Ethos. Arete. Phronesis. Anaphora. Hyperbole. Logical Fallacies. False Dilemma. Slippery Slope. Ad Hominem. Mystery. Call to Action.

He put it down. He said: the first note uses these.

Laugher said: which ones.

Bungler said: ethos. The writer establishes themselves as credible. As the reasonable person in an unreasonable world. Arete — the appearance of virtue. I respect the fact that other people have a very different way of thinking. Phronesis — practical wisdom. I really want

to be someone who helps you to understand.

Laugher said: or the person actually has those qualities and is describing them.

Bungler said: and that is the specific problem with ethos, arete, and phronesis. They are indistinguishable from the genuine article when deployed well.

Laugher said: so a genuinely ethical person and a person performing ethics look identical.

Bungler said: until they do not.

Laugher said: and by then.

Bungler said: and by then something has usually gone wrong.

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*Scene Five*

Laugher picked up the handwritten list. He looked at it for a long time. He said: the same person wrote both notes.

Bungler said: what makes you say that.

Laugher said: look at the third note. I am eighteen years old. My parents gave me this money.

He put the two handwritten documents side by side. The list and the third note. He said: the handwriting.

Bungler looked. He said: yes.

Laugher said: so the eighteen year old wrote the list.

Bungler said: or was given it by someone and copied it.

Laugher said: or the eighteen year old compiled it themselves.

Bungler said: an eighteen year old who knows what phronesis is.

Laugher said: an eighteen year old who knows what propaganda is.

Bungler said: yes. That is the more significant thing.

Laugher said: someone taught them.

Bungler said: yes. Someone taught them.

They both looked at the list. At the handwriting. At the specific quality of someone who has written something they know by heart.

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*Scene Six*

Laugher said: the first note uses call to action. I really want to be someone who helps you to understand. The call to action is implicit. Come with me. Let me show you.

Bungler said: toward what.

Laugher said: that is what is not said.

Bungler said: everything important is what is not said.

Laugher said: in this note, yes. The position is not stated. The side is not stated. The destination is not stated. Only the journey. Only the reasonable companionable journey together toward understanding.

Bungler said: that is the most persuasive kind of call to action. The one that does not name what it is calling you toward.

Laugher said: or the most honest. If you do not know where you are going you cannot pretend to.

Bungler said: you can always pretend.

Laugher said: yes. You can always pretend.

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*Scene Seven*

Bungler said: the first note is propaganda propaganda. It performs reasonableness as a rhetorical strategy while listing the strategies of rhetoric on the other note.

Laugher said: or a reasonable person wrote a reasonable note and then made a list of things they find interesting.

Bungler said: the list is not the list of someone who finds things interesting. It is the list of someone who knows how the machinery works.

Laughter said: knowing how the machinery works does not make you the machine.

Bungler said: it makes you more dangerous than someone who does not know.

Laughter said: or more careful.

Bungler said: how do you tell the difference.

Laughter said: that is the third time you have asked that question.

Bungler said: it will not be the last.

Laughter said: no. It will not.

They sat with the three notes on the desk between them. The typed note. The handwritten list. The third note from the eighteen year old. The money in Bungler's drawer.

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### *Scene Eight*

Solver said from her desk: the public forum.

Bungler said: what about it.

She said: the third note says to publish your results on Public Forum blogsite in two months.

Bungler looked at the third note. He had not read it carefully enough the first time. He read it again.

Please publish your results on Public Forum blogsite in two months.

He said: two months.

Laughter said: that is the deadline.

Bungler said: you said there was no deadline.

Laughter said: I said the note did not mention one. Now we know it does.

Bungler said: two months.

He wrote it in his notebook. He drew a box around it. He said: academia, public health, media, finance. Two months. A public forum with — he looked it up — 340,000 subscribers.

Laugher said: we had better be right.

Bungler said: we are always right.

Laugher laughed for a long time.

Bungler looked at the three notes. At the money in the drawer. At the two months written in a box in his notebook.

He said: tomorrow we begin.

# Propaganda Propaganda

## Chapter Three — The Investigation Designed

### *Scene One*

Bungler arrived the next morning with a plan. This was not unusual. Bungler frequently arrived with plans. The plans were usually wrong in the specific ways that Bungler's plans were wrong — confident in the wrong direction, organized around the wrong center — but they were plans, and having a plan was better than not having one, and Bungler had been having plans for fifty years and the firm had survived all of them.

He said: we start with academia.

Laugher arrived at nine-oh-two and said: why academia.

Bungler said: because academia is where knowledge is produced. If the rhetorical strategies are operating anywhere they are operating there first.

Laugher said: they are operating everywhere simultaneously.

Bungler said: we have to start somewhere.

Laugher said: yes. We do.

Bungler wrote: Start — Academia at the top of a fresh page. He underlined it. He added two question marks.

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### *Scene Two*

Laughter said: what do we know.

Bungler read from his notebook. He had written: strategies, eighteen years old, anonymous, random, two months, 340,000 subscribers, academia public health media finance.

Laughter said: that is what we do not know dressed as what we know.

Bungler looked at his notebook. He said: we know the strategies.

Laughter said: we know their names.

Bungler said: knowing the names is knowing something.

Laughter said: knowing the names of the planets is not the same as understanding gravity.

Bungler said: it is a start.

Laughter said: yes. It is a start.

Bungler wrote: names are a start in his notebook. He looked at it. He crossed it out. Some things did not need to be written down.

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### *Scene Three*

Solver put the handwritten list in the center of the table.

Bungler and Laughter looked at it.

She said: it is organized. Not random. Look at the groupings.

They looked.

She said: ethos, arete, phronesis. Those are character-based strategies. The credibility of the person speaking.

She said: anaphora, hyperbole. Language-based. The construction of the sentences themselves.

She said: false dilemma, slippery slope, ad hominem. Logic-based. The structure of the argument.

She said: mystery, call to action. Engagement-based. What the audience does next.

She said: whoever compiled this list understood the architecture. This is not a list made by someone who looked up propaganda on the internet. This is a list made by someone who has been thinking about this for a long time.

She went back to her desk.

Bungler and Laugher looked at the list. Then they looked at each other.

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*Scene Four*

Bungler said: I will take the harm side.

Laugher said: why do you get the harm side.

Bungler said: because I thought of it first.

Laugher said: you did not think of it first. Solver divided it.

Bungler said: I was going to suggest it.

Laugher said: you were going to suggest taking the harm side.

Bungler said: yes.

Laugher said: why.

Bungler said: because I have fifty years of experience recognizing harm.

Laugher said: I have fifty years of experience recognizing good.

Bungler said: that is not what you are known for.

Laugher laughed. This was fair.

Solver put two notecards on the table without looking up from her desk. One said harm. One said good. Bungler took harm. Laugher took good. They accepted this without further argument because the notecards had settled something the argument could not.

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*Scene Five*

Bungler looked up the Public Forum blogsite.

340,000 subscribers. Updated daily. Comment sections active. The kind of forum where things got read and shared and argued about and taken seriously by the kind of people who took things seriously.

He showed it to Laughter.

Laughter said: that is a great many people.

Bungler said: yes.

Laughter said: we had better be right.

Bungler said: we are always right.

Laughter said: we are frequently confident.

Bungler said: same thing.

Laughter said: those are very different things.

Bungler looked at the screen. 340,000 subscribers. Two months. He wrote both numbers in his notebook and drew a box around them. The box made them feel more manageable. It did not make them more manageable.

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### *Scene Six*

Laughter said: she assigned us the sides.

Bungler said: yes.

Laughter said: she knew which one each of us would take.

Bungler said: she has known us for fifty years.

Laughter said: yes. But she did not ask. She put the notecards on the table.

Bungler said: because asking would have produced the argument we just had.

Laughter said: and the notecards ended it.

Bungler said: yes.

Laughter said: that is a rhetorical strategy.

Bungler looked at Solver's desk. She was typing. She did not look up.

He said: which one.

Laugher said: I do not know the name for it. But it is on the list somewhere.

Bungler said: everything is on the list somewhere.

Laugher said: yes. That may be the point.

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*Scene Seven*

Bungler said: two months. Four worlds. One question. A public forum with 340,000 subscribers waiting for an answer we do not yet have. We do not know who hired us. We do not know what world the villain is in. We do not know if the client is the villain. We have \$100 bills in a drawer and a handwritten list from an eighteen year old chosen at random and a typed note from someone who wants to help us understand the stories we tell ourselves.

He stopped.

He said: I cannot remember working with less.

Laugher said: we worked the Fenn case with a dead canary and a kitchen table.

Bungler said: we had a client.

Laugher said: we had Edna Marsh.

Bungler said: yes. Edna Marsh. She came in and sat in the good chair and told us what had happened. We knew who had hired us and what they wanted. This is different.

Laugher said: yes. This is different.

They sat with the difference.

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*Scene Eight*

Bungler opened his notebook to a fresh page.

He wrote: Chapter One — Academia.

He said: we start where knowledge claims to live.

Laughter said: or where it claims to be produced.

Bungler said: same thing.

Laughter said: not always.

Bungler wrote that down too. Not always. He looked at it. It was the most useful thing in the notebook so far and it was two words.

He said: tomorrow. The university library. We go separately. We look for different things. We come back and we tell each other what we found.

Laughter said: and argue about it.

Bungler said: yes. And argue about it.

Laughter said: that is the methodology.

Bungler said: that has always been the methodology.

Laughter said: yes. It has.

He picked up his coat. At the door he stopped. He said: Robert.

Bungler said: yes.

Laughter said: the boy or girl question.

Bungler said: girl.

Laughter said: you cannot know that.

Bungler said: I know it.

Laughter laughed. He went home.

# **Propaganda Propaganda**

## **Chapter Four — Academia: The First Examples**

### *Scene One*

Bungler returned from the university library at half past two.

He put his notes on the table. He said: I found something that will settle this immediately.

Laugher said: settle what.

Bungler said: the harm side. He opened his notebook. He said: 1980. New England Journal of Medicine. Boston. A researcher named Hershel Jick at Boston University Medical Center published a letter. Not a study. A letter. Five sentences. The letter noted that among hospitalized patients receiving narcotics, addiction was rare.

He looked up.

He said: that letter was cited 608 times over the following decades. It was cited as proof that opioids were non-addictive. Purdue Pharma cited it directly in marketing OxyContin. The letter studied hospitalized patients under controlled supervision. It said nothing about outpatients. It said nothing about long-term use. It said nothing about addiction in the general population. The context was stripped from the statement at the first rung of the ladder. The statement became fact. The fact became data. The data became evidence. The evidence became universal proof.

He closed the notebook.

He said: two million people are dead.

Laugher said nothing.

Bungler said: the rhetorical strategy was ethos. The New England Journal of Medicine. A statement became a fact because of where it was published not because of what it said.

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*Scene Two*

Laugher had been to the university too. Not to the library. To the faculty lounge, where a professor of epidemiology had talked to him for an hour about the history of public health because Laugher had laughed at one of his jokes and the professor had found this so gratifying that he had talked without stopping.

Laugher put his notes on the table.

He said: 1854. Soho, London. Cholera was killing people at a rate of 500 per week. The prevailing medical theory was miasma — bad air caused disease. A physician named John Snow did not believe this. He had no proof. He had a hypothesis.

He looked at his notes.

He said: Snow mapped every cholera death in Soho on a grid. He canvassed the residents. He found the cluster centered on the Broad Street water pump. He presented his map to the Board of Guardians of St. James's Parish. He used the map — a visual argument, a call to action built from data — to persuade them to remove the handle from the pump. The deaths stopped. Snow had no germ theory to cite. He had pattern recognition and a map and the specific rhetoric of showing rather than telling. The ethos he deployed was not his credentials. It was the map itself. 500 people per week were dying. The map said: here. The pump handle was removed. The field of epidemiology began.

He closed his notes.

He said: the rhetorical strategy was the ethos of the evidence itself. The call to action — remove the handle — made undeniable by the visual argument.

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*Scene Three*

Bungler said: ethos of the institution used to kill two million people.

Laugher said: ethos of the evidence used to stop a cholera outbreak.

Bungler said: the same strategy.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: opposite outcomes.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: Snow's map is correlation not causation. The outbreak was already declining when the handle was removed. Snow assumed causation from correlation. That is a logical fallacy. It is the most celebrated logical fallacy in the history of public health.

Laugher said: the handle was removed and the deaths stopped.

Bungler said: post hoc ergo propter hoc. After this therefore because of this. A logical fallacy.

Laugher said: people stopped dying.

Bungler said: for the wrong reason.

Laugher said: they were still not dying.

Bungler opened his notebook. He wrote: post hoc ergo propter hoc — Snow — people still not dying. He looked at what he had written. He said: that is not a refutation.

Laugher said: no.

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*Scene Four*

Bungler said: I have a second example.

He opened his notebook.

He said: 1998. The Lancet. London. A physician named Andrew Wakefield published a study of 12 children claiming a link between the

MMR vaccine and autism.

He paused.

He said: the study had 12 subjects. Twelve. The data was fabricated. Wakefield had been paid by lawyers seeking to sue vaccine manufacturers before the study was published — a conflict of interest he did not disclose. The Lancet retracted the paper in 2010. Wakefield lost his medical license. But the paper had already moved. Vaccination rates dropped. Measles outbreaks followed. In 2019 the United States recorded 1,282 measles cases — the highest since 1992. Children died of a preventable disease because a fraudulent study of 12 patients published in a prestigious journal was cited as proof.

He closed his notebook.

He said: the rhetorical strategy was ethos of the Lancet combined with slippery slope. If the MMR vaccine causes autism in these 12 children it will cause autism in all children.

He said: two prestigious journals. The New England Journal of Medicine and the Lancet. The same ethos weaponized. People dead in both cases.

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### *Scene Five*

Laugher said: 1928. St Mary's Hospital, London. A bacteriologist named Alexander Fleming returned from vacation to find that a mold had contaminated one of his petri dishes and killed the surrounding bacteria.

He looked at his notes.

He said: Fleming did not discover penicillin by rhetoric. He discovered it by accident and then used the specific rhetoric of the scientific paper — ethos of the institution, precision of the data, the mystery of the mechanism — to make the discovery legible to other scientists. Howard Florey and Ernst Chain read the paper a decade later and developed penicillin into a usable antibiotic. The rhetoric of the

scientific paper — dry, precise, without hyperbole — was the tool that kept the discovery alive for the ten years between Fleming's observation and its application.

He closed his notes.

He said: penicillin is estimated to have saved 200 million lives. The rhetorical strategy was the scientific paper as rhetorical form. Ethos of precision. Mystery of the mechanism that kept other scientists curious for a decade.

He said: two prestigious institutions. The same ethos. 200 million lives saved in one case. Children dead of measles in the other.

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### *Scene Six*

Bungler said: the Lancet killed children.

Laugher said: the Lancet also published work that saved lives. The same journal. The same peer review process.

Bungler said: and in one case the process failed completely. Twelve fabricated subjects. A paid conflict of interest. A retracted paper that had already moved.

Laugher said: and in another case a dry precise paper kept a discovery alive for ten years until two other scientists read it and changed medicine.

Bungler said: so the process is unreliable.

Laugher said: or the people inside it are unreliable.

Bungler said: same thing.

Laugher said: no it is not. The process is the same process. The people are different people. You cannot condemn the process because of the people.

Bungler said: you cannot separate the process from the people who run it.

Laugher said: Wakefield was caught. The Lancet retracted. The process corrected itself.

Bungler said: after children died.

Laugher said: yes. After children died. And the same kind of process saved 200 million before anyone questioned it.

Bungler said: you are using anaphora.

Laugher said: what.

Bungler said: you keep repeating the 200 million. It is accumulating weight with every repetition. That is anaphora. That is on the list.

Laugher said: I am repeating it because it is true.

Bungler said: true things can still be deployed rhetorically.

Laugher said nothing for a moment. Then he said: yes. They can.

...

### *Scene Seven*

Bungler said: four examples. Two institutions. The ethos of prestigious journals used to kill people and to save people. The scientific paper as a tool of fraud and as a tool of discovery. The same peer review process producing Wakefield and Fleming. The same journal system producing the opioid letter and penicillin.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: what is the finding.

Laugher said: that both things are true simultaneously.

Bungler said: that is not a finding. That is an observation.

Laugher said: most findings begin as observations.

Bungler said: we have two months.

Laugher said: yes. We do.

Bungler said: tomorrow public health.

Laugher said: I found something in public health that will change your mind about all of this.

Bungler said: nothing will change my mind about two million dead people.

Laugher said: I am not talking about the dead people. I am talking about the living ones.

...

*Scene Eight*

Bungler sat at his desk for a moment longer after Laugher left. He looked at the \$100 bills in his drawer. He thought about an eighteen year old counting them out from their parents' money and addressing an envelope to strangers chosen at random.

He did not know if it was a boy or a girl.

He thought it was a girl.

He could not have said why.

# **Propaganda Propaganda**

## **Chapter Five — Public Health: Fear and Salvation**

### *Scene One*

Bungler said: this world is different from academia.

Laugher said: how.

Bungler said: in academia the strategies are used on other academics. Specialists arguing with specialists. The harm stays inside the institution mostly. Or it takes decades to reach the population.

Laugher said: the opioid letter took decades.

Bungler said: yes. In public health the strategies are used on everyone. Immediately. Including us.

Laugher said: yes. Including us.

Bungler said: we received public health communications. We were moved by them or not moved by them. We changed our behavior or we did not. We are not outside this world looking in. We are inside it.

Laugher said: we have always been inside it.

Bungler said: yes. But now we are supposed to be investigating it. That is a different position.

Laugher said: is it possible to investigate something you are inside.

Bungler said: we are about to find out.

...

### *Scene Two*

Bungler opened his notebook.

He said: 2020. Autumn. United Kingdom. The Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies had a behavioral science subgroup called SPI-B. Compliance with COVID restrictions was falling. SPI-B produced a document. The document recommended using fear to increase compliance. The specific language in the document was this: the perceived level of personal threat needs to be increased among those who are complacent, using hard-hitting emotional messaging.

He looked up.

He said: government communications shifted. They emphasized death. Overwhelmed hospitals. Individual responsibility for other people's deaths. The advertising campaigns showed a woman suffocating. A man dying alone. The fear worked. Compliance increased. It also worked on people who were already terrified. The documented harms: anxiety disorder presentations increased 25% in adults, 50% in children. General practitioners reported patients too frightened to attend cancer screenings.

He closed his notebook.

He said: behavioral scientists manufactured fear deliberately. They knew they were manufacturing it. The document said so. The false dilemma embedded in the communications: you are either frightened enough to comply or you are killing people. The rhetorical strategies were hyperbole and call to action. Fear as the tool. Compliance as the outcome. Harm as the consequence nobody planned for.

...

### *Scene Three*

Laugher put his notes on the table.

He said: 1796. Berkeley, Gloucestershire. Smallpox was killing approximately 400,000 Europeans annually. A physician named Edward Jenner observed that milkmaids who contracted cowpox seemed to be immune to smallpox. He tested the hypothesis by inoculating an

eight-year-old boy named James Phipps with cowpox and then exposing him to smallpox.

He looked at his notes.

He said: Jenner wrote up the results and submitted them to the Royal Society. They rejected the paper as too revolutionary. He published it privately. The practice spread anyway — not through the institution but through the persuasion of results. Physicians who tried it found it worked. The ethos of the working thing spread faster than the ethos of the institution. Napoleon vaccinated his entire army in 1805 despite being at war with Britain because the evidence was too compelling to ignore. Smallpox was eradicated in 1980. The only human disease to have been completely eliminated.

He closed his notes.

He said: the rhetorical strategy was the ethos of the result itself. It works. Try it. The call to action embedded in the evidence. Not in a document produced by behavioral scientists recommending fear. In the thing itself working.

...

#### *Scene Four*

Bungler said: fear manufactured deliberately by people who knew they were manufacturing it.

Laughter said: and compliance increased and people stayed home and the National Health Service did not collapse in the winter of 2020.

Bungler said: and children developed anxiety disorders at twice the normal rate.

Laughter said: and some of those children's grandparents did not die because their children stayed home.

Bungler said: you cannot know that.

Laughter said: neither can you.

They sat with that.

Bungler said: the SPI-B document exists. The language is documented. The perceived level of personal threat needs to be increased. That is not interpretation. That is what was written and what was done.

Laughter said: yes.

Bungler said: behavioral scientists sitting in a room deciding to make a frightened population more frightened.

Laughter said: to save lives.

Bungler said: they believed it would save lives.

Laughter said: and it did save some.

Bungler said: and it harmed others.

Laughter said: yes. Both things happened. You are describing the harm side. I am describing the good side. We were assigned opposite sides of the same event.

Bungler said: yes. We were.

...

### *Scene Five*

Bungler said: second example. 1950s through 1970s. United States. Research in the 1950s was beginning to link sugar to heart disease. The sugar industry needed the science to point elsewhere. Documents uncovered in 2016 showed that the Sugar Research Foundation paid three Harvard scientists — including the chairman of Harvard's nutrition department — to publish a review minimizing the link between sugar and heart disease and emphasizing saturated fat as the primary dietary cause of cardiovascular disease. The review was published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* in 1967 without disclosing the funding source.

He paused.

He said: for the next fifty years dietary guidelines emphasized fat reduction. The food industry replaced fat with sugar. Obesity rates rose.

Type 2 diabetes became epidemic. The specific harm of the specific manipulation took five decades to be partially corrected. The rhetorical strategies were ethos of Harvard and the *New England Journal of Medicine*. Ad hominem against researchers who continued to study sugar — they were marginalized within the field. Paid science presented as independent science.

Laughter said: the same journal again.

Bungler said: yes. The same journal. Paid for by the sugar industry in 1967. Cited by Purdue Pharma in the opioid case. The institution as shield.

...

### *Scene Six*

Laughter said: 1964. United States. The Office of the Surgeon General. Surgeon General Luther Terry released the first Surgeon General's Report on Smoking and Health. A 387-page document. Ten distinguished scientists. Two years of review. 7,000 scientific articles examined.

He looked at his notes.

He said: Terry used the full ethos of the office. He released the report on a Saturday to minimize stock market impact. The anaphora of the evidence: study after study, finding after finding, conclusion after conclusion. He made a specific choice about language. He did not say smoking causes all lung cancer. He said smoking is a cause. The precision protected the finding from legal challenge. The call to action was embedded in the conclusion not stated directly. Smoking rates in the United States began a decline that has continued for sixty years.

He closed his notes.

He said: the report is credited with saving an estimated eight million lives in the United States alone. The rhetorical strategy was ethos of the institution deployed with maximum precision. The strategic avoidance of hyperbole made the finding legally and scientifically durable.

...

*Scene Seven*

Bungler said: Harvard scientists paid to lie about sugar. The ethos of Harvard used to deceive.

Laugher said: the Surgeon General's office used to tell the truth about tobacco. The ethos of the institution deployed honestly.

Bungler said: the same strategy. In one case purchased. In another deployed with integrity.

Laugher said: so the institution is not the problem either.

Bungler said: then what is the problem.

Laugher said: I do not know yet.

Bungler said: we are four examples in and we do not know what the problem is.

Laugher said: we know what the problem is not. The institution is not the problem. The ethos is not the problem. The strategy is not the problem.

Bungler said: the people inside.

Laugher said: possibly.

Bungler said: the intention.

Laugher said: possibly.

Bungler said: both.

Laugher said: possibly both. We have sixteen more chapters.

Bungler wrote in his notebook: not the institution — not the ethos — not the strategy — possibly the people — possibly the intention — possibly both. He drew a box around possibly. It was the most honest word in the notebook.

...

*Scene Eight*

Laugher said: Robert.

Bungler said: yes.

Laugher said: were you frightened. During the pandemic.

Bungler said: yes.

Laugher said: did the fear change your behavior.

Bungler said: yes.

Laugher said: was the behavior the right behavior.

Bungler said: I do not know.

Laugher said: neither do I.

A pause.

Laugher said: that is what it means to be inside the world you are investigating. You cannot know if what was done to you was right or wrong because you cannot know what would have happened if it had not been done.

Bungler said: that is a very uncomfortable position for a detective.

Laugher said: yes. It is.

# **Propaganda Propaganda**

## **Chapter Six — Public Health: The Body and the Record**

### *Scene One*

Bungler arrived the next morning with a specific quality of anger that Laugher recognized. Not the argument anger, which was loud and gesturing and produced a great deal of notebook writing. The quiet anger. The kind that came from sitting with something overnight and not being able to put it down.

He put his notes on the table.

He said: men under oath.

Laugher said: tobacco.

Bungler said: yes.

...

### *Scene Two*

Bungler opened his notebook.

He said: 1994. United States Congress. Hearings on tobacco and nicotine addiction. Seven tobacco company chief executives appeared before Congress. Under oath, all seven stated that they believed nicotine was not addictive.

He looked up.

He said: internal documents later revealed that tobacco companies had known since the 1960s that nicotine was addictive. They had funded research designed to produce contrary findings. They had suppressed internal research that confirmed addiction. The men were under oath, before Congress, in suits, speaking with the authority of corporate leadership. The slippery slope they prevented by maintaining the position: if nicotine is addictive then the companies are responsible for addiction then the companies are liable for the health consequences. Hundreds of thousands of people died of tobacco-related disease in the years between the testimony and the eventual legal reckoning.

He said: ethos under oath. Ad hominem against the scientists who published addiction research — they were called paid advocates, anti-business, not objective.

He closed the notebook.

He said: seven men. Sworn testimony. Knowing what they knew. Saying what they said.

...

### *Scene Three*

Laugher put his notes on the table.

He said: 1980s through 1990s. Uganda. Uganda had one of the highest HIV infection rates in the world in the mid-1980s — estimated at 15% of the adult population in some regions. The government deployed what became known as the ABC campaign. Abstain. Be faithful. Use condoms.

He looked at his notes.

He said: the specific mechanism that worked was not the campaign itself. It was community-based communication. Village health workers. Religious leaders. Local officials. All delivering the same message in the language and cultural context of their specific communities. The ethos was local. Not the government in Kampala. Not the World Health Organization. The person you knew. Uganda's HIV prevalence dropped

from approximately 15% in the late 1980s to 5% by 2001. The most dramatic reduction achieved by any country without widespread antiretroviral treatment.

He closed his notes.

He said: the rhetoric that worked was decentralized and trusted because it came from inside not outside. Ethos of the local voice. Call to action specific enough to change behavior.

...

#### *Scene Four*

Bungler said: men under oath using the ethos of sworn testimony to protect an industry that killed hundreds of thousands.

Laugher said: village health workers using the ethos of personal trust to save a population.

Bungler said: the person you knew.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: the tobacco executives were also people someone knew. They were in the community. They attended events. They were trusted by their employees and their families and their shareholders.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: the same intimacy. Different purposes.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: so intimacy is not the variable either.

Laugher said: no. It is not.

Bungler wrote: intimacy — not the variable in his notebook. The list of things that were not the variable was getting long. He was not sure if this was progress.

...

#### *Scene Five*

Bungler said: second example. 2020. Multiple governments. United States, Brazil, United Kingdom. In the early months of the pandemic, official guidance stated that masks were not effective for general public use and should not be worn by healthy people.

He paused.

He said: the guidance was shaped by two factors. First, genuine uncertainty about mask efficacy in community settings. Second, a deliberate decision to protect the supply of medical-grade masks for healthcare workers by discouraging public purchasing. The second factor was not disclosed. The public was told masks did not work. When guidance changed weeks later and masks were mandated, the public had been told the opposite by the same authorities.

He said: the harm was not primarily in the guidance itself. It was in the destruction of trust. When authorities next said something was safe or unsafe, a significant portion of the population had direct recent evidence that authorities said things for reasons other than the truth. The rhetorical strategy was false dilemma — either masks work or they do not — when the actual position was: masks may work but we need you not to buy them so we are telling you they do not.

...

### *Scene Six*

Laugher said: 1991. United States. The American Academy of Pediatrics launched a campaign. Three words. Back to sleep.

He looked at his notes.

He said: Sudden Infant Death Syndrome was killing approximately 5,000 infants annually. Research had established that infants sleeping on their stomachs were at significantly higher risk. The campaign used the ethos of the pediatrician delivered through every available channel. Hospitals. Pediatrician offices. Childbirth classes. Television. The message was stripped of everything except the action. Back to sleep. No hyperbole. No mystery. No false dilemma. Just the behavior and the

reason. SIDS rates in the United States dropped by more than 50% in the decade following the campaign launch.

He closed his notes.

He said: three words. No manufactured fear. No behavioral scientists recommending harder emotional messaging. The minimum effective dose of rhetoric. And it worked better than most things that tried harder.

...

*Scene Seven*

Bungler said: the mask guidance destroyed trust in institutions. Governments told people masks did not work because they needed people not to buy masks. They did not say that. They said masks do not work. Those are different things.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: you agree with me.

Laugher said: I agree that the mask guidance was a false dilemma deployed in service of a supply chain problem rather than public health. Yes.

Bungler said: that does not happen often. You agreeing with me.

Laugher said: it happens when you are right.

Bungler said: and three words saved half of all SIDS deaths.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: the minimum effective dose.

Laugher said: yes. The campaign is studied as a model precisely because it used rhetoric so sparingly.

Bungler said: so the question is not more or less rhetoric. The question is whether the rhetoric is aimed at the truth or away from it.

Laugher said: yes. I think that is the question.

Bungler said: we are getting somewhere.

Laugher said: yes. Slowly.

...

*Scene Eight*

Bungler said: the seven men under oath. I have been thinking about them since yesterday.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: they may have believed what they said.

Laugher said: the documents suggest otherwise.

Bungler said: the documents suggest the companies knew. The executives may have believed what the companies told them.

Laugher said: that is a generous reading.

Bungler said: I am trying to understand it. Not defend it. There is a difference between a man who lies under oath knowing he is lying and a man who repeats under oath what he has been told and believes it.

Laugher said: hundreds of thousands of people died either way.

Bungler said: yes.

Laugher said: does the distinction matter to them.

Bungler said: it matters to the question of what the strategy is doing. If the executives believed it then the strategy had worked on them first before they deployed it on Congress. They were inside the propaganda before they became its instrument.

Laugher said nothing for a moment.

He said: write that down.

Bungler wrote it down.

# **Propaganda Propaganda**

## **Chapter Seven — Public Health: Trust and Its Mechanisms**

### *Scene One*

Laugher arrived laughing. Not at the stairs. At something he had read the night before. He put his notes on the table before he had taken off his coat.

He said: I found the thing that will change your mind.

Bungler said: nothing will change my mind.

Laugher said: an imam changed his mind. About polio.

Bungler said: go ahead.

...

### *Scene Two*

Bungler opened his notebook.

He said: 2003. Geneva. The World Health Organization issued guidance on influenza pandemic preparedness. The guidance defined pandemic phases and recommended stockpiling of antiviral medications. Specifically Tamiflu, manufactured by Roche. Governments worldwide stockpiled Tamiflu. The United Kingdom alone spent £424 million.

He looked up.

He said: the evidence base for Tamiflu was the subject of a decade-long dispute. Roche withheld full clinical trial data from independent researchers. When the Cochrane Collaboration — the gold standard of independent medical evidence review — finally obtained the complete data in 2014, their conclusion was this: Tamiflu reduced the duration of flu symptoms by approximately half a day. It did not reduce hospitalizations. It did not reduce complications. Billions spent by governments around the world. Medications eventually destroyed unused.

He said: the WHO's relationship with pharmaceutical industry funding was a conflict of interest embedded in the recommendation structure. The rhetorical strategies were ethos of the WHO and mystery — the withheld clinical trial data protected the recommendation from scrutiny for a decade.

...

### *Scene Three*

Laugher said: 2000 to the present. Global. The Global Polio Eradication Initiative, coordinated by the WHO and UNICEF. In 1988 there were approximately 350,000 cases of polio annually. By 2019 there were 175.

He looked at his notes.

He said: the final push required reaching children in conflict zones, in communities that distrusted outside health workers, in places where the logistics of vaccine delivery were nearly impossible. The initiative used local religious leaders. In Nigeria, imams who had initially opposed the vaccine were taken to see polio victims in other countries. They came back and endorsed the vaccine. The initiative used the ethos of the local health worker — paid a small stipend, trained to deliver two drops of oral vaccine and explain what they were doing. It used mystery — why do some children get it and others not — to generate questions that the vaccine answered. The rhetoric that reached the last child was not the WHO's. It was the imam's. It was the local health worker's. It

was the neighbor's.

He closed his notes.

He said: ethos of the trusted local voice. Mystery converted into explanation. Call to action delivered person to person.

...

#### *Scene Four*

Bungler said: the WHO recommended a drug that cost governments billions and reduced flu symptoms by half a day.

Laugher said: the WHO's initiative reduced polio from 350,000 cases to 175.

Bungler said: the same organization.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: in one case the institution failed. In another it succeeded because it stepped aside and let the imam do the work.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: the institution was most effective when it was least visible.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: that is useful.

He wrote it in his notebook. The institution was most effective when it was least visible. He did not draw a box around it. He did not add question marks. He let it sit on the page.

...

#### *Scene Five*

Bungler said: second example. 2015 to 2023. United States. The National Eating Disorders Association. The largest eating disorder organization in the country. They accepted sponsorship from companies

that marketed weight loss products — diet programs, meal replacement shakes, calorie counting apps. The organizations whose products are clinically associated with triggering eating disorders were funding the organization that treated eating disorders.

He paused.

He said: in 2023 NEDA replaced its human helpline staff with an AI chatbot named Tessa. Tessa gave advice that eating disorder specialists identified as potentially harmful to people in recovery. NEDA shut Tessa down after four days. The helpline has not been fully restored. The rhetorical strategies were ethos of the nonprofit and mystery — the sponsorship relationships were not prominently disclosed in patient-facing materials.

He said: the institution presented as a place of safety. The funding behind it working against the people it claimed to serve. Nobody announced this. Nobody disclosed it. The mystery protected the arrangement.

...

### *Scene Six*

Laugher said: 2003. Thailand. SARS was spreading across Asia. Thailand needed to prevent community transmission while maintaining public calm and economic activity. The Thai government deployed a communication strategy that was transparent about uncertainty. A deliberate choice.

He looked at his notes.

He said: the public health officials said: here is what we know. Here is what we do not know. Here is what we are doing. Here is what you should do. The call to action was specific and behavioral. Wash your hands. Wear a mask if you are sick. Report symptoms. Thailand recorded nine SARS cases and two deaths. Neighboring countries with less transparent communication strategies recorded significantly higher case counts.

He closed his notes.

He said: the rhetoric of honest uncertainty built trust that made the specific behavioral calls to action effective. Ethos of honest uncertainty. Call to action specific enough to act on. The transparency was not a weakness. It was the mechanism.

...

*Scene Seven*

Bungler said: honest uncertainty worked in Thailand.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: the WHO was not honest about Tamiflu.

Laugher said: no.

Bungler said: NEDA was not transparent about its sponsorships.

Laugher said: no.

Bungler said: so transparency is the variable.

Laugher said: or honesty. They are related but not identical.

Bungler said: how are they different.

Laugher said: you can be transparent without being honest. You can disclose everything and still mislead by what you emphasize and what you bury.

Bungler said: give me an example.

Laugher said: Volkswagen. But that is finance. We will get there.

Bungler said: so honesty is closer to the center of it than transparency.

Laugher said: I think so. But I cannot prove it yet.

Bungler wrote: honesty closer to center than transparency — cannot prove yet in his notebook.

...

*Scene Eight*

Bungler said: the imam.

Laughter said: yes.

Bungler said: he changed his mind after seeing polio victims.

Laughter said: yes.

Bungler said: that is not a rhetorical strategy. That is evidence.

Laughter said: the evidence was delivered rhetorically. Someone decided to take him to see the victims rather than show him a chart. That is a choice about how to present the evidence. That is rhetoric.

Bungler said: so even the direct presentation of evidence is a rhetorical act.

Laughter said: yes. The moment you choose what to show someone and in what order and in what context, you are making rhetorical choices.

Bungler said: then there is no presentation of evidence that is not rhetorical.

Laughter said: I think that is correct.

Bungler said: then the question is not whether to use rhetoric. The question is whether the evidence underneath it is true.

Laughter said: yes.

Bungler said: and whether the rhetoric is aimed at the truth or away from it.

Laughter said: yes. Both things.

Bungler said: we said that yesterday.

Laughter said: yes. And it is still true today.

# Propaganda Propaganda

## Chapter Eight — Public Health: The Last Examples

### *Scene One*

Bungler said: two more from public health and we move to media.

Laugher said: I am not ready to move to media.

Bungler said: the deadline does not care whether we are ready.

Laugher said: no. It does not.

Bungler said: how many weeks do we have left.

Laugher counted. He said: seven.

Bungler said: seven weeks for three more worlds. Media, finance, and whatever comes after we have read everything we found. Writing it. Making sense of it.

Laugher said: we will not make sense of it.

Bungler said: we will make as much sense of it as it admits of.

Laugher said: that may not be much.

Bungler said: no. It may not. Go ahead.

...

### *Scene Two*

Bungler opened his notebook.

He said: March 2021. United States. The CDC Director, Rochelle Walensky, appeared on a news program. She said she was feeling a

sense of impending doom about rising COVID case counts. She urged continued restrictions.

He looked up.

He said: at the moment she said this, hospitalizations and deaths were falling. Vaccination was accelerating. The case counts she cited were rising in specific regions and falling in others. The statement was accurate about case counts. It was inaccurate as a description of the overall trajectory.

He said: the harm was specific. The emotional language — impending doom — activated fear responses in a population that had been managed by fear for a year. Mental health deterioration accelerated. Economic reopening was delayed in regions where it was safe to reopen. Small business owners. Children whose schools remained closed. People whose elective medical procedures were postponed again.

He said: the rhetorical strategies were hyperbole and anaphora. Impending doom. And the crisis language that had been running for twelve months had accumulated weight with every repetition. The population's nervous systems had been primed. The phrase landed harder than it should have because of everything that had come before it.

...

### *Scene Three*

Laugher said: 2014 to 2016. West Africa. Sierra Leone, Guinea, Liberia. The West African Ebola epidemic killed over 11,000 people. A significant barrier to containment was that affected communities did not trust outside health workers. They were hiding sick family members rather than reporting them.

He looked at his notes.

He said: Médecins Sans Frontières and local authorities changed the communication strategy. Instead of emphasizing what would happen to sick people — isolation, hospitalization, separation from family — they

emphasized what the community could do. They used local community leaders to deliver the message. They explained the biology of transmission in plain language. The mystery of the disease — why does it kill some people and not others — was addressed directly rather than left to produce fear. The call to action was reframed: report cases early and your family member has a better chance.

He said: when communities began reporting cases rather than hiding them the outbreak became controllable. The epidemic ended in 2016. Call to action reframed from fear of reporting to hope of survival. Ethos of the community leader as messenger.

...

*Scene Four*

Bungler said: impending doom when doom was not impending.

Laughter said: report cases early when the call to action was the difference between an epidemic that ends and one that does not.

Bungler said: the CDC director was wrong about the trajectory.

Laughter said: MSF was right about the community.

Bungler said: one used fear inaccurately.

Laughter said: one used hope accurately.

Bungler said: so accuracy is the variable.

Laughter said: or honesty. Again.

Bungler said: you keep coming back to honesty.

Laughter said: because it keeps being the answer.

Bungler said: it is not a satisfying answer. Honesty is a moral quality. We are supposed to be identifying a rhetorical mechanism.

Laughter said: perhaps the rhetorical mechanism is honesty.

Bungler said: that is circular.

Laughter said: yes. But it might be true.

...

*Scene Five*

Bungler said: second example. 2010. United Kingdom. A public health campaign called Change4Life. Aimed at reducing childhood obesity. Encouraging families to eat well and move more.

He paused.

He said: the campaign was funded in part by PepsiCo, Kellogg's, Unilever, Mars, and Coca-Cola. These companies used the campaign's branding on products that public health advocates considered part of the obesity problem. The false dilemma embedded in the campaign: childhood obesity is caused by individual family choices, therefore the solution is individual family behavior change. The structural causes were not addressed. The food environment. Advertising to children. The economics of processed food. The companies that contributed to the problem helped design the message that located the problem in individual families.

He said: rhetorical strategies were call to action aimed at individuals and false dilemma protecting the food industry from structural accountability. The message was accurate at the individual level — families can make better choices — and misleading at the structural level. A technically true message deployed to prevent a more important truth from being examined.

...

*Scene Six*

Laugher said: 1988. United Kingdom. HIV was spreading. The government needed to communicate risk to a general population that did not consider itself at risk. The Department of Health commissioned a campaign.

He looked at his notes.

He said: the campaign used a tombstone and an iceberg and the voice of a well-known actor. The tombstone was hyperbole. The iceberg

was metaphor — most of the danger is below the surface. The call to action was implicit: get informed. Leaflets were delivered to every household in the country. Condom sales increased by 20% in the months following. The campaign is credited with keeping UK HIV rates significantly lower than comparable countries that did not conduct population-wide communication campaigns.

He said: hyperbole of the tombstone used deliberately to reach a population that was not attending to the information through other channels. The campaign was controversial. Some said it was too frightening. Some said not frightening enough. What it was: specific, memorable, deployed at a moment when the information had genuine behavioral consequences.

...

*Scene Seven*

Bungler said: the tombstone was hyperbole.

Laughter said: yes.

Bungler said: and it worked.

Laughter said: yes.

Bungler said: and impending doom was hyperbole.

Laughter said: yes.

Bungler said: and it caused anxiety disorders in children.

Laughter said: yes.

Bungler said: same strategy. What is different.

Laughter said: the tombstone was aimed at people who were not paying attention to a real risk. The impending doom was aimed at people who were already terrified.

Bungler said: the target.

Laughter said: yes. The target is the variable. The same tool in the same population at a different moment produces a different result. The population that needed to be frightened into attention and the population

that had been frightened for twelve months are different populations even if they share the same postcode.

Bungler said: context.

Laughter said: context. Yes.

Bungler wrote: context — target — not just the tool, not just the truth — where it lands and in whom in his notebook.

...

### *Scene Eight*

Bungler closed his public health notes. He said: eight examples. Four worlds of public health.

Laughter said: and no single answer.

Bungler said: several partial answers. Honesty. The truth underneath. The target. The context. The institution stepping aside. None of them complete.

Laughter said: perhaps the answer is the combination.

Bungler said: that is not useful. You cannot tell someone: use the right strategy on the right target in the right context with honest intentions and accurate information. That describes every good communicator who has ever lived. It does not identify the mechanism.

Laughter said: perhaps the mechanism is not identifiable from the outside.

Bungler said: then we cannot answer the question.

Laughter said: or the answer is that it cannot be answered from the outside. Which is itself an answer.

Bungler said: a very inconvenient one.

Laughter said: yes. Inconvenient answers are still answers.

Bungler looked at his notes. Seven weeks. Three more worlds. He said: media tomorrow.

Laughter said: yes.

Bungler said: Rwanda is in the media examples.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: I have been thinking about Rwanda since I found it.

Laugher said: yes. I know.

# **Propaganda Propaganda**

## **Chapter Nine — Media: The Institution**

### *Scene One*

Bungler said: media is the world that carries all the other strategies to everyone else.

Laughter said: yes.

Bungler said: if the strategies operate in academia and public health and finance but nobody knows about them, the harm is limited. Media is the amplifier.

Laughter said: or the corrective. Woodward and Bernstein. Upton Sinclair.

Bungler said: we will get there.

Laughter said: yes. We will.

Bungler said: I want to say something before we begin the examples.

Laughter said: go ahead.

Bungler said: we read newspapers. We have read newspapers our whole lives. We have been moved by things we read. We have changed our minds because of things we read. We have formed opinions about events we did not witness based entirely on what reporters told us. We are not outside this world. We are its product as much as any other.

Laughter said: yes.

Bungler said: I find that uncomfortable.

Laughter said: yes. So do I.

...

*Scene Two*

Bungler opened his notebook.

He said: 2003. New York Times. Washington bureau. A reporter named Judith Miller reported extensively on Iraq's weapons of mass destruction program in the lead-up to the invasion. She cited anonymous government sources and defectors from Iraq.

He looked up.

He said: her reporting was wrong. Iraq did not have the weapons programs she described. Her sources were connected to the Iraqi National Congress, which had an interest in promoting the invasion. The New York Times published a lengthy editor's note in 2004 acknowledging that its coverage had been insufficiently skeptical. Miller left the paper. The harm: journalism with the institutional weight of the New York Times was used to build public support for a war that killed between 150,000 and one million people, depending on the methodology used to count.

Laughter said: that range.

Bungler said: yes. The methodology used to count is itself a rhetorical choice.

Laughter said: the lower number or the higher number serves different arguments.

Bungler said: yes. And neither is wrong, precisely. They are measuring different things. Direct deaths. Indirect deaths. Conflict-related deaths. The method determines the number and the number determines the case.

He said: the rhetorical strategies were ethos of the New York Times and anonymous sources presented as authoritative without the reader being able to evaluate the source's motivations. The false dilemma in public discourse: you either believe the intelligence or you are naive about the threat of terrorism.

...

*Scene Three*

Laugher put his notes on the table.

He said: 1972 to 1974. Washington Post. Washington DC. Two reporters named Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein investigated a break-in at the Democratic National Committee headquarters. The Nixon administration called it a third-rate burglary. It was not.

He looked at his notes.

He said: Woodward and Bernstein used every rhetorical strategy available in service of a true story. An anonymous source who met in parking garages, whose identity was kept secret for thirty years. The ethos of the Washington Post, which staked its institutional reputation on reporting that the White House called false. The anaphora of follow the money, repeated across months of investigation. The implicit call to action in every story: Congress must investigate. The investigation led to Nixon's resignation.

He closed his notes.

He said: the reporting established the investigative journalism model that remains the standard for accountability reporting. Mystery of the anonymous source. Ethos of the institution staked on the reporting. Anaphora of follow the money as investigative method.

...

*Scene Four*

Bungler said: the New York Times staked its reputation on wrong reporting.

Laugher said: the Washington Post staked its reputation on right reporting.

Bungler said: the same strategy. Institutional ethos as guarantee of truth.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: in one case the guarantee was false. In another it held.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: how do you know before you know.

Laugher said: you do not.

Bungler said: that is not useful.

Laugher said: it is honest. And we have established that honesty keeps being the answer even when it is not useful.

Bungler said: the anonymous source.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: Miller's sources were anonymous. Deep Throat was anonymous. Both anonymous. One misleading. One essential to one of the most important investigations in the history of American journalism.

Laugher said: the anonymity is not the variable.

Bungler said: no. The truth the anonymous source is protecting is the variable.

Laugher said: yes. And you cannot verify that without knowing who they are.

Bungler said: which is why they are anonymous.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: circular again.

Laugher said: yes. Again.

...

### *Scene Five*

Bungler said: second example. 2014. Rolling Stone magazine. A journalist named Sabrina Rubin Erdely published a story about a gang rape at a University of Virginia fraternity. The story was told through the account of a student identified only as Jackie.

He paused.

He said: the story was not adequately fact-checked. Key details could not be verified. The named fraternity had not held an event on the night described. The Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism conducted an independent review and found systematic failures in the reporting and editing process. Rolling Stone retracted the story.

He said: the harm had two parts. A named fraternity was publicly identified as the site of a gang rape that the evidence did not support. Members received death threats. And the retraction was used by people acting in bad faith to discredit legitimate reporting on campus sexual assault across the country. One story's failure became a weapon against an entire category of journalism covering genuine harm.

He said: mystery — Jackie's identity was protected, making her account impossible to independently verify. Call to action — the story was designed to produce outrage and institutional change. Both strategies amplified the harm when the story fell apart.

...

### *Scene Six*

Laugher said: 1906. United States. A journalist named Upton Sinclair spent seven weeks working inside the meatpacking plants of Chicago to document the working conditions of immigrant laborers.

He looked at his notes.

He said: Sinclair published his findings as a novel. Not a report. *The Jungle*. He understood that the rhetorical form of fiction could reach readers that a factual report could not. The mystery of the narrative: what is actually happening inside these plants. The call to action embedded in the final chapters. The book produced a public outcry that led directly to the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906 and the Meat Inspection Act of the same year. The foundations of American food safety regulation.

He said: Sinclair said he aimed at the public's heart and hit their stomach. He wanted to generate sympathy for immigrant workers. Instead he generated revulsion at contaminated meat. The rhetoric worked. It worked on the wrong target. The novel as rhetorical form reaching readers a report could not reach.

...

*Scene Seven*

Bungler said: Rolling Stone destroyed trust in an entire category of journalism covering campus sexual assault.

Laughter said: Sinclair created the foundations of food safety regulation. And his rhetoric worked on the wrong target and still produced genuine good.

Bungler said: the fiction. He used fiction to deliver facts.

Laughter said: yes.

Bungler said: is that legitimate.

Laughter said: the meatpacking plants were real. The conditions were real. The fiction was the frame not the facts.

Bungler said: Miller's sources were real people with real positions. The intelligence was real intelligence. The frame was wrong.

Laughter said: yes.

Bungler said: so the frame is the variable.

Laughter said: or the verification of the facts inside the frame.

Bungler said: both.

Laughter said: yes. Both.

...

*Scene Eight*

Bungler said: between 150,000 and one million.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: that range. The methodology determines whether it is 150,000 or one million. And the number determines the weight of the harm.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: so the counting of harm is itself a rhetorical act.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: which means our briefs are rhetorical acts.

Laugher said: yes. We knew that.

Bungler said: I am saying it out loud.

Laugher said: yes. It is worth saying out loud.

Bungler said: we are selecting examples that demonstrate what we went looking for. We are counting harm and good in ways that support our positions. The briefs are not neutral documents.

Laugher said: no. They are not.

Bungler said: we knew that.

Laugher said: yes. But saying it out loud is different from knowing it.

Bungler wrote it in his notebook anyway.

# Propaganda Propaganda

## Chapter Ten — Media: The Image

### *Scene One*

Laugher put a photograph on the table when he arrived. He did not explain it. He let Bungler look at it.

Tiananmen Square. 1989. A man in a white shirt carrying shopping bags standing in front of a column of tanks. The lead tank trying to go around him. The man stepping to block it. The tank stopping.

Bungler looked at it for a long time.

He said: who is he.

Laugher said: nobody knows.

Bungler said: what happened to him.

Laugher said: nobody knows that either.

Bungler said: and this is your good example.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: a man whose name we do not know and whose fate we do not know.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: go ahead then.

...

### *Scene Two*

Bungler opened his notebook.

He said: 1996 to 2016. Fox News. New York. Roger Ailes built the network on the premise that mainstream media had a liberal bias and that a conservative alternative was needed.

He looked up.

He said: the network deployed a specific architecture. The anaphora of its own phrases — fair and balanced, we report you decide — established the ethos of objectivity while the programming delivered ideologically consistent content. The false dilemma embedded in every hour: there are two sides to every story and they are the liberal side and the conservative side. Researchers documented that Fox News viewers were measurably more misinformed on specific factual questions — about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, about the provisions of the Affordable Care Act, about the findings of climate science — than viewers of other networks or people who watched no news at all.

He said: the network did not create the misinformation. It amplified it with institutional authority. Ethos of fair and balanced. Anaphora of crisis language — the country is under threat, the values are under attack — repeated across every programming hour for twenty years.

...

### *Scene Three*

Laugher said: 1989. Beijing. The Chinese government deployed tanks to clear Tiananmen Square of pro-democracy protesters. A man in a white shirt with shopping bags stepped in front of a column of tanks and stopped them. Four photographers in the Beijing Hotel photographed it. The images were smuggled out of China.

He looked at his notes.

He said: the man's identity is unknown. His fate is unknown. The Chinese government has attempted to suppress the image for thirty-five years. It remains one of the most reproduced photographs in history. The ethos of the ordinary person against the machine. The mystery of who he was and what happened to him. The call to action that required no

words.

He closed his notes.

He said: the image argues for something that cannot be stated without the image losing half its power. It is not an argument. It is a condition. The viewer's own mind does the rest.

...

*Scene Four*

Bungler said: Fox News used anaphora to make viewers less informed about specific factual matters.

Laughter said: one unknown man with shopping bags argued for human dignity without a single word.

Bungler said: the image is a rhetorical strategy.

Laughter said: yes.

Bungler said: and Fox News's phrases are a rhetorical strategy.

Laughter said: yes.

Bungler said: the image moved the world. The phrases misinformed it.

Laughter said: the image also has no verified facts attached to it.

Bungler said: what.

Laughter said: we do not know who he was. We do not know what he was doing there. We do not know what he intended. We do not know if the tanks would have run him over. The image argues by mystery. Everything we feel looking at it comes from what we bring to it.

Bungler said: you are defending Fox News.

Laughter said: I am not defending Fox News. I am noting that the image works the same way fair and balanced works. It creates a condition in which the viewer's own mind does the persuading.

Bungler said: the conditions are not the same.

Laugher said: no. The man in the image was real. The tanks were real. He stood in front of them. That is verified. Fair and balanced was a phrase selected to produce a specific impression that the programming contradicted.

Bungler said: so the difference is the truth underneath.

Laugher said: yes. Again.

...

### *Scene Five*

Bungler said: second example. 2016. Facebook. During the United States presidential election, false news stories spread across Facebook at rates that exceeded mainstream news coverage of the same events.

He looked at his notes.

He said: a BuzzFeed analysis found that the top twenty false election stories generated more engagement than the top twenty legitimate stories combined. The stories claimed the Pope had endorsed one candidate. That the other had sold weapons to a foreign enemy. Facebook's algorithm rewarded engagement regardless of accuracy. Researchers found that false news was shared more by older users and by users with strong partisan identities — the populations whose votes were most consequential in a close election.

He said: the rhetorical strategies were slippery slope embedded in the headlines and ad hominem as primary content. The stories were not about policy. They were about the character and conduct of individuals. The algorithm did not choose these strategies. It rewarded whatever produced engagement. The strategies that produced the most engagement were the ones that triggered the strongest emotional responses. Fear and disgust and outrage.

...

### *Scene Six*

Laugher said: 1955. Montgomery, Alabama. Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a bus. She was arrested. The Montgomery Bus Boycott began. It lasted 381 days.

He looked at his notes.

He said: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference understood that the images of peaceful protesters met with violence would do more rhetorical work than any speech. The ethos of the dignified protester against the violence of the state. The anaphora of we shall not be moved across 381 days of economic pressure and physical intimidation. The mystery: how long can they sustain this. The call to action addressed to the nation: this is happening in America. The Supreme Court ruled Montgomery's bus segregation unconstitutional in November 1956.

He said: the media coverage was the mechanism by which a local protest became a national movement. The image as the argument. Ethos of dignity against violence. The strategy was deliberate. King and the SCLC understood that they were making rhetorical choices about how the movement would be seen.

...

### *Scene Seven*

Bungler said: Facebook's algorithm produced misinformation by rewarding what generated engagement.

Laugher said: King's strategy produced the desegregation of public transportation by understanding what images would move a nation.

Bungler said: both used images.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: both moved large numbers of people.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: the algorithm made rhetorical choices without knowing it was making them.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: King made rhetorical choices knowing exactly what he was doing.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: is knowing the variable.

Laugher said: knowing and intending. The algorithm had no intention. It optimized for engagement. King had a specific intention. Justice. The knowing and the intention together.

Bungler said: naive realism in a machine.

Laugher said: what.

Bungler said: the algorithm believed, if a machine can be said to believe, that what generated engagement was what was true. Or at least what was worth showing. It could not see itself generating the conditions for misinformation because it had no perspective outside its own optimization.

Laugher said: yes. That is exactly right.

Bungler wrote: naive realism in a machine in his notebook. He looked at it. He said: we will come back to that.

...

### *Scene Eight*

Bungler looked at the photograph of the Tank Man again.

He said: his identity is unknown.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: his fate is unknown.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: and the image has moved the world for thirty-five years on the basis of one verified fact.

Laugher said: he stood in front of the tanks. That is what is verified.

Bungler said: and from that one verified fact the viewer's own mind constructs everything else.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: that is what all seventeen architectures do. The transcript you showed me. They create a condition. The other person's brain finishes the job.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: and the image does the same thing.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: and King's strategy did the same thing.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: and Fox News's phrases did the same thing.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: the mechanism is the same. The truth underneath is different.

Laugher said: yes. That is what we have been saying for ten chapters.

Bungler said: yes. But now I can see the mechanism clearly. I could not see it before.

Laugher said: no. You could not.

# Propaganda Propaganda

## Chapter Eleven — Media: The Slope

### *Scene One*

Bungler said: I want to talk about QAnon before we begin the examples.

Laughter said: go ahead.

Bungler said: it uses every strategy on the list simultaneously. Deliberately. That is different from most of what we have examined. Most of the harm examples involved strategies used without full awareness of what they were doing. The sugar industry knew it was paying for science. The tobacco executives knew something. But QAnon is different. Someone built it. Someone made choices about which strategies to deploy and in what sequence and at what intensity.

Laughter said: you do not know that.

Bungler said: I know it was constructed. The drops were written. The architecture was designed. Someone chose mystery. Someone chose anaphora. Someone chose the false dilemma of awake or asleep.

Laughter said: or it emerged. Online things can emerge without a single architect.

Bungler said: it does not matter.

Laughter said: it matters enormously. An architect implies intention. Emergence implies something different.

Bungler said: what does emergence imply.

Laughter said: that the strategies work even without someone consciously deploying them. That the architecture appears because it fits what human brains respond to, not because someone designed it.

Bungler said: that is more frightening than an architect.

Laugher said: yes. It is.

...

*Scene Two*

Bungler opened his notebook.

He said: beginning in October 2017 on an internet message board, an anonymous poster claiming to have high-level government security clearance began posting cryptic messages about a secret war between a prominent political figure and a cabal of powerful criminals running the global elite.

He looked up.

He said: the posts used every strategy on the list simultaneously. Mystery — the anonymous source, the cryptic content, the invitation to decode. Ethos — the claimed security clearance. Anaphora — a repeated phrase meaning unified purpose, repeated across millions of posts. Slippery slope — if the cabal exists then they control everything. False dilemma — you are either awake or you are asleep. Call to action — trust the plan. The harm: participants in a violent attack on the United States Capitol in January 2021 described beliefs connected to this movement. A man in Arizona murdered his children because he believed they had serpent DNA. A woman in New York killed her husband with a spear gun because she believed he was a reptilian entity. The FBI designated the movement a domestic terrorism threat.

He said: all strategies. Simultaneously. The harm was not incidental. It was the product of a system that had been optimized, whether by design or emergence, to produce maximum belief and minimum verification.

...

*Scene Three*

Laugher said: 1963. Birmingham, Alabama. Martin Luther King Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference designed a campaign to fill the jails of Birmingham with protesters and force a confrontation that the media would cover and the nation would see.

He looked at his notes.

He said: King and his colleagues understood that Bull Connor's violence would be the argument. The ethos of the nonviolent protester against the fire hose and the police dog was the rhetorical core of the campaign. The images broadcast nationally — children being knocked down by water hoses — produced a public response that made the Birmingham Campaign the turning point of the civil rights movement. The mystery: how can this be happening in America. The call to action addressed to the Kennedy administration: you must act. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 followed.

He closed his notes.

He said: the planned confrontation as rhetorical strategy. Ethos of nonviolent dignity. The image as the argument. King knew exactly what he was doing. He had studied rhetoric. He had studied Gandhi. He made deliberate choices about how the movement would present itself and where the confrontation would occur.

...

#### *Scene Four*

Bungler said: the movement used all the strategies to move people toward murdering their families.

Laugher said: King used all the strategies to move a nation toward legislative equality.

Bungler said: the Civil Rights Act is now used to justify diversity, equity and inclusion programs that discriminate against white Americans and Asian Americans.

Laugher said: and without the Civil Rights Act the fire hoses would still be running.

Bungler said: that is a slippery slope.

Laugher said: it is a historical observation.

Bungler said: it is both.

Laugher said: yes. It is both.

Bungler said: so the slope King deployed ran sixty years and did not stop where he intended.

Laugher said: and the slope Bull Connor was on would have run indefinitely if King had not deployed his slope to interrupt it.

Bungler said: slopes stopping slopes.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: that is the whole of political history.

Laugher said: yes. It is.

Bungler said: and nobody can know in advance where their slope stops.

Laugher said: no. Nobody can.

Bungler wrote: nobody can know where their slope stops in his notebook. He looked at it. It was the most uncomfortable thing he had written in eleven chapters.

...

### *Scene Five*

Bungler said: second example. 2020. A twenty-six minute film was released claiming that the pandemic had been planned by a global elite. Within a week it had been viewed eight million times. It was removed by major platforms. It was reuploaded thousands of times.

He looked at his notes.

He said: the film's central figure had been dismissed from her research position for data manipulation and her published research had

been retracted. The film presented her as a silenced truth-teller. The ad hominem ran in reverse: the institutions discrediting her were themselves the evidence of the conspiracy. Every fact-check became proof of the conspiracy it was checking. Vaccine hesitancy among populations that watched the film was measurably higher than in control populations. The misinformation was specifically targeted at Black Americans, exploiting legitimate and well-founded historical distrust of medical institutions.

He said: ad hominem in reverse — the attack on the messenger becoming proof of the message. Mystery of the silenced scientist. The specific targeting of a population with legitimate historical grievances was not incidental. It was the point of entry.

...

### *Scene Six*

Laugher said: 2017. New York and Washington. Journalists at the New Yorker and the New York Times documented decades of sexual harassment and assault by a prominent film producer. The reporting used multiple named sources — women willing to go on the record.

He looked at his notes.

He said: the mystery was how this had continued for so long given how many people knew. The anaphora of me too spread across social media — each repetition adding weight to the next, each person who said it making it easier for the next person to say it. The call to action was embedded in the testimony: believe women, hold the powerful accountable. The producer was convicted. More than two hundred powerful men in media, finance, politics, and academia lost their positions in the eighteen months following the reporting.

He said: the ethos of the named source — the woman who went on record, knowing the cost. The anaphora that built from two words into a movement. The mystery of the duration that made the question unavoidable: how did this continue so long and who allowed it. The

rhetoric of testimony moved institutions that decades of individual complaints had not moved.

...

*Scene Seven*

Bungler said: the film used ad hominem in reverse. Every attack on the central figure became evidence for her.

Laugher said: and the attacks on the women who accused the producer became evidence against them for decades. Until they went on the record and the attacks could not hold.

Bungler said: what changed.

Laugher said: the named source. The ethos of the woman willing to be seen. You cannot attack the credibility of someone who has put their name on it as easily as you can attack an anonymous accusation.

Bungler said: the same strategies defeated the same strategies.

Laugher said: better deployed strategies defeated worse deployed strategies.

Bungler said: or the truth underneath finally became impossible to keep underground.

Laugher said: both. The truth needed the rhetoric to surface. The rhetoric needed the truth to hold.

Bungler said: they are not separable.

Laugher said: no. They are not.

...

*Scene Eight*

Bungler said: the man who murdered his children.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: he believed they had serpent DNA.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: because of a movement that used mystery and ethos and anaphora and call to action.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: the same tools King used.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: I find that very difficult to sit with.

Laugher said: yes. So do I.

Bungler said: the tools are identical. The truth underneath is opposite. A man is dead. Children are dead. And on the other side of the same tools, the Civil Rights Act. The desegregation of public transportation. Two hundred powerful people held accountable for decades of harm.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: and I cannot find a way to look at the tools themselves and know which outcome they are going to produce.

Laugher said: no. You cannot. That is what we have been finding for eleven chapters.

Bungler said: yes.

Neither of them said anything for a while.

# Propaganda Propaganda

## Chapter Twelve — Media: The Voice

### *Scene One*

Bungler said: Rwanda.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: 800,000 people in 100 days.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: the radio.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: I want to say something before we begin.

Laugher said: go ahead.

Bungler said: we have voices. We use them every day in this office to argue about these strategies. The radio in Rwanda used the same mechanism. The human voice in the home. The intimacy of someone speaking directly to you. I find it difficult to proceed past that observation without naming it.

Laugher said: yes. It should be named.

Bungler said: named and then we proceed.

Laugher said: yes. Named and then we proceed.

...

### *Scene Two*

Bungler opened his notebook.

He said: 1994. Rwanda. In the months before and during the genocide, a radio station called Radio Mille Collines broadcast propaganda directing Hutu listeners to kill Tutsi neighbors. The Tutsi were referred to repeatedly as *inyenzi*. Cockroaches.

He looked up.

He said: the radio was the primary communication infrastructure in Rwanda at the time. It reached people who could not read. It used the intimacy of the human voice in the home — a neighbor's voice, a familiar voice, a voice that had been there every day. The anaphora of cockroaches repeated across hundreds of broadcasts dehumanized an entire population in the specific way that makes mass killing psychologically possible. When people are insects they can be exterminated. The word did that work.

He said: the founder of the station was convicted of genocide, incitement to genocide, and crimes against humanity by the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda. 800,000 people were killed in 100 days. The radio was not incidental to this. It was the organizational infrastructure. The anaphora of dehumanization. The call to action explicit and repeated and directed at a specific population.

He closed his notebook.

...

### *Scene Three*

Laugher said: 2010. Tunisia. A street vendor named Mohamed Bouazizi had his vegetable cart confiscated by a government official. He set himself on fire in protest. He was photographed. The image spread.

He looked at his notes.

He said: the image became the ignition point of what was called the Arab Spring. The mystery of who this man was — a street vendor, not a politician, not an activist, someone entirely ordinary — made the act legible to millions of people who recognized the humiliation and the desperation. The call to action was not stated. It was felt. Governments

fell in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen. The rhetoric of a single image moved faster and further than any editorial or speech could have.

He said: the ethos of the ordinary person. The mystery of who he was. The image as the argument that the people who had nothing left had still made a choice. Whether the outcomes of the Arab Spring were good is a contested question. That the image moved the world is not.

He closed his notes.

...

*Scene Four*

Bungler said: anaphora of cockroaches organized a genocide.

Laughter said: the image of a street vendor ignited a revolution.

Bungler said: the radio reached people who could not read.

Laughter said: the image reached people who could not read.

Bungler said: the same access to the same populations.

Laughter said: yes.

Bungler said: one used it to dehumanize.

Laughter said: one used it to recognize.

Bungler said: the human voice dehumanized. The image of a human humanized.

Laughter said: yes.

Bungler said: anaphora made killing possible. A single image made resistance possible.

Laughter said: yes.

Bungler said: the direction is everything.

Laughter said: yes. The direction is everything.

Bungler said: we have said that before.

Laughter said: yes. And now we have Rwanda and Bouazizi and we mean it differently than we did when we first said it.

...

*Scene Five*

Bungler said: second example. 2011 to 2019. United Kingdom. A newspaper called the News of the World was the best-selling English-language newspaper in the world. It had been publishing since 1843. 168 years of institutional authority.

He looked at his notes.

He said: journalists and private investigators working for the paper hacked the voicemails of thousands of people. Celebrities. Politicians. Crime victims. The families of dead soldiers. A murdered schoolgirl named Milly Dowler. The hacking of Dowler's phone — and the deletion of messages that briefly gave her family false hope that she was still alive — was the event that ended the paper. The publisher closed the paper in 2011 and paid over one billion pounds in settlements.

He said: the harm beyond the individual victims was institutional. The revelation that the most-read English-language newspaper in the world had been operating a criminal surveillance network destroyed public trust in tabloid journalism in ways that legitimate tabloid journalism has not recovered from. The ethos of 168 years of publication protected the conduct underneath it for decades. The institution as shield. And when the shield failed, it damaged not just the guilty institution but the entire category of journalism it represented.

...

*Scene Six*

Laugher said: 2018 to 2019. A sixteen-year-old student in Sweden began standing outside the national parliament with a handmade sign one Friday instead of going to school. She was alone. She was photographed.

He looked at his notes.

He said: the image — a sixteen-year-old girl alone with a handmade sign — was the argument before she said a word. The ethos of the child: if the adults will not act, the children must. The mystery: who is this girl and why is she alone and what does she know that the adults do not. The anaphora of how dare you, delivered at the United Nations General Assembly in September 2019 with the specific fury of someone who had nothing to lose and knew it. The School Strike for Climate spread to 161 countries and involved over four million participants.

He said: whether it changed policy is a question that remains open. That it changed the conversation is not. The image of the lone child as the opening argument. The ethos of having nothing to lose. The anaphora at the highest institutional platform available.

He closed his notes.

...

*Scene Seven*

Bungler said: the News of the World used 168 years of institutional ethos to hack a murdered child's voicemail.

Laugher said: a sixteen-year-old used the ethos of a child with nothing to lose to move four million people.

Bungler said: the institution exploited its trust.

Laugher said: the child spent hers.

Bungler said: spent.

Laugher said: yes. She used what she had in service of what she believed. The institution used what it had in service of a story that sold copies.

Bungler said: spend trust or exploit it. That is the choice.

Laugher said: yes. Those are very different things to do with the same asset.

Bungler said: and both are rhetorical choices.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: one leaves the asset intact.

Laugher said: one destroys it.

Bungler said: and the destruction harms people who had nothing to do with the choice.

Laugher said: yes. The legitimate tabloid journalists who lost their credibility because of the News of the World. The readers who lost a source they had trusted.

Bungler said: collateral harm.

Laugher said: yes.

...

*Scene Eight*

Bungler said: cockroaches.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: repeated until it was the only word that mattered in the room.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: and how dare you.

Laugher said: yes. Also repeated. Also the only words that mattered.

Bungler said: anaphora in both cases. The same mechanism. One organized the killing of 800,000 people. One moved four million to act on climate.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: the direction.

Laugher said: yes. Always the direction.

Bungler said: I keep saying that and it keeps being insufficient.

Laugher said: why insufficient.

Bungler said: because the direction is not written on the tool. You cannot look at anaphora and know which way it is pointing. You have to know the intention. You have to know the truth underneath. You have to

know the target. You have to know the context. By the time you know all of those things you are already inside the argument. You cannot evaluate it from outside.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: which means the person being persuaded cannot evaluate it from outside either.

Laugher said: no. They cannot.

Bungler said: which is the whole problem.

Laugher said: yes. That is the whole problem.

He said it without laughing. Some things did not produce laughter. This was one of them.

# Propaganda Propaganda

## Chapter Thirteen — Finance: The Institution

### *Scene One*

Bungler said: finance.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: I lost money in 2008.

Laugher said: so did I.

Bungler said: do you know why.

Laugher said: the banks overleveraged themselves.

Bungler said: because of the strategies on the list. Or at least the strategies on the list made it possible for the overleveraging to go undetected until it was too late.

Laugher said: the complexity protected the fraud.

Bungler said: mystery as camouflage. We will get there. First example.

...

### *Scene Two*

Bungler opened his notebook.

He said: 2001 to 2002. Houston, Texas. Enron Corporation. Fortune magazine named it the most innovative company in America six years in a row. Its auditors were Arthur Andersen, one of the most prestigious

accounting firms in the world. Its executives were celebrated. Its stock was recommended by analysts across the industry.

He looked up.

He said: Enron used complex financial instruments — special purpose entities — to hide debt off its balance sheet and inflate its reported earnings. The complexity was the protection. Nobody outside the company could understand the instruments well enough to challenge them. When the company collapsed in December 2001 it was the largest bankruptcy in American history to that point. Twenty thousand employees lost their jobs. Employee pension funds that had been invested in Enron stock were wiped out. People who had been encouraged to hold Enron stock in their retirement accounts lost everything.

He said: the rhetorical strategies were mystery — complexity as camouflage — and ethos. Fortune's most innovative company six years running. The authority of the recognition doing the work that scrutiny would have undone.

...

### *Scene Three*

Laugher put his notes on the table.

He said: 1936. Cambridge. John Maynard Keynes published a book called *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*. The Great Depression had produced mass unemployment across the industrialized world for seven years. The prevailing economic orthodoxy held that markets would self-correct if left alone. They were not self-correcting.

He looked at his notes.

He said: Keynes was the most respected economist in the English-speaking world. His book argued that government spending could stimulate aggregate demand and lift economies out of depression. The book was dense and technical, deliberately addressed to economists

rather than the public. The mystery of why classical economics failed to explain what everyone could see around them. The call to action addressed to governments: spend. Keynesian economics shaped global economic policy for forty years.

He closed his notes.

He said: the ethos of the most respected economist. The mystery of a theory that admitted what classical economics would not — that markets could fail and stay failed. The call to action with sufficient authority behind it to move governments. Whether Keynes was entirely right is a different question. That he used the rhetoric of the technical paper to move governments is not.

...

#### *Scene Four*

Bungler said: Enron used the mystery of complexity to hide fraud.

Laughter said: Keynes used the mystery of theoretical failure to move governments toward economic recovery.

Bungler said: both deliberately obscure.

Laughter said: Enron obscured to deceive. Keynes obscured because the subject is genuinely complex and he was writing for economists who needed the complexity.

Bungler said: the audience is a variable.

Laughter said: yes. Enron's audience was investors who trusted the complexity without understanding it. Keynes's audience was economists who needed to work through the complexity to evaluate it. One trusted and was betrayed. One engaged and was served.

Bungler said: or one trusted because they lacked the tools to evaluate and one engaged because they had them.

Laughter said: yes.

Bungler said: so access to the tools to evaluate is also a variable.

Laugher said: yes. A person who can read the balance sheet is in a different position from one who cannot.

Bungler said: and most people cannot.

Laugher said: no. Most people cannot.

...

### *Scene Five*

Bungler said: second example. 2008. Global financial system. Investment banks in New York and elsewhere packaged bundles of subprime mortgages — mortgages sold to people who could not afford them — into complex securities and sold them to investors. The securities were rated by ratings agencies. The ratings agencies gave many of them the highest possible rating.

He looked at his notes.

He said: the ratings agencies had conflicts of interest. They were paid by the banks whose products they rated. The false dilemma presented to investors: you either accept the rating or you are not a sophisticated investor. When the mortgages began to fail, the securities failed, the banks that held them failed, the credit system froze. Eight million Americans lost their jobs. Six million lost their homes. The global recession cost an estimated twenty-two trillion dollars in lost economic output.

He said: ethos of the ratings agencies — the rating is the rating and the rating agency is the authority. False dilemma between trust and professional identity. The slippery slope was real and fast: mortgages failed, securities failed, banks failed, credit froze, the economy contracted globally within months.

...

### *Scene Six*

Laugher said: 1997 to 2007. Bangladesh and then the world. A man named Muhammad Yunus had observed that the rural poor of Bangladesh could not access conventional banking. Without credit, subsistence farmers and small traders could not invest in the tools that would lift them out of poverty.

He looked at his notes.

He said: Yunus developed microcredit — small loans, often under one hundred dollars, to people without collateral, using social pressure within borrowing groups as the guarantee mechanism. He then used the specific rhetoric of the demonstration project to spread the model. The mystery: how can you lend money to people with nothing and get it back. The answer became the argument. The repayment rate on his institution's loans exceeded 98%. The ethos of the result. The call to action addressed to development economists and aid organizations: give poor people credit, not charity. He received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2006. Microcredit institutions now serve over 200 million clients globally.

He closed his notes.

He said: the demonstration project as the argument. The mystery of the mechanism — social pressure within borrowing groups — that made other economists lean forward to understand it. The ethos of 98% repayment doing the work that any amount of theoretical argument could not.

...

### *Scene Seven*

Bungler said: AAA ratings on fraudulent products. The false dilemma of trust or sophistication.

Laugher said: 98% repayment on loans to people with nothing. The mystery of how as the tool that moved development economics.

Bungler said: the same financial credibility mechanism. The rating and the repayment rate.

Laugher said: one was fabricated. One was real.

Bungler said: and both moved enormous amounts of money.

Laugher said: yes. In opposite directions.

Bungler said: the facts underneath.

Laugher said: yes. Again.

Bungler said: I keep saying that and you keep agreeing.

Laugher said: because it keeps being true.

Bungler said: it is the simplest possible answer. The facts underneath determine whether the rhetoric produces good or harm.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: and yet people keep being deceived by rhetoric whose facts are false.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: because they cannot always verify the facts.

Laugher said: yes. And because the rhetoric is designed to make verification seem unnecessary.

Bungler said: ethos doing the work that facts should do.

Laugher said: yes. You trust the rating agency. You do not check the mortgages. Why would you. They have the rating.

...

### *Scene Eight*

Bungler said: I lost money in 2008. Because someone at a ratings agency gave the highest possible rating to something that did not warrant it. And I trusted the rating because I did not have the tools to verify it myself.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: confirmation bias.

Laugher said: what.

Bungler said: I wanted to believe the investment was sound. I found evidence that confirmed it — the rating — and I did not look for evidence that contradicted it.

Laugher said: because contradicting evidence was not available to you.

Bungler said: some of it was. There were people raising questions. I did not look for them.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: we are all inside this. That is what we said about public health.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: and it is true here too.

Laugher said: yes. It is true in every world we have looked at.

Bungler said: because the person being persuaded is always inside the persuasion before they know they are being persuaded.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: and that is what the strategies are designed to do. Or what they do whether designed or not.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: we are inside this investigation the same way.

Laugher said: yes. We are.

Bungler did not write anything in his notebook. Some things did not fit in notebooks.

# Propaganda Propaganda

## Chapter Fourteen — Finance: The Mission

### *Scene One*

Laugher said: I want to show you something before you show me yours.

Bungler said: that is not the order.

Laugher said: today it is. The Giving Pledge.

Bungler said: go ahead.

...

### *Scene Two*

Laugher put his notes on the table.

He said: 2010. United States. Warren Buffett and Bill Gates launched a commitment they called the Giving Pledge. A public promise by wealthy individuals to give the majority of their wealth to philanthropy. The two wealthiest men in America committing publicly and inviting others to do the same.

He looked at his notes.

He said: the ethos was maximum. The call to action addressed to other billionaires: sign. The mystery implicit — what will you do with it if you do not give it away. The anaphora of each new signatory's commitment adding social weight to the previous ones. By 2023, 236 individuals and families from 28 countries had signed, representing

pledged giving of over 600 billion dollars. The public commitment changed social expectations around extreme wealth in ways that private philanthropy had not.

He closed his notes.

He said: ethos of Buffett and Gates. Anaphora of each new pledge. Call to action with implicit social consequence for non-participation. The mechanism was social pressure made visible.

...

### *Scene Three*

Bungler opened his notebook.

He said: 1992 to 2008. New York. Bernard Madoff ran the largest Ponzi scheme in history. He reported fraudulent returns on approximately 65 billion dollars in investments over several decades.

He looked up.

He said: Madoff had been chairman of NASDAQ. He served on Securities and Exchange Commission advisory committees. He was a respected figure in philanthropic communities. The ethos was impeccable. The mystery was his strategy — he refused to explain exactly how he generated consistent returns. The refusal to explain became proof of sophistication. If you could understand it, the reasoning went, it was not exclusive enough to work. The false dilemma for investors: either you trust Madoff or you miss out on the most consistent returns in the market. When the scheme collapsed in 2008, 37,000 clients in 136 countries lost money. A Holocaust survivor lost his life savings. A fund manager who had directed clients to Madoff killed himself.

He said: ethos of the man. Mystery of the strategy. False dilemma between trust and exclusion from something valuable.

...

*Scene Four*

Laugher said: 600 billion dollars pledged to philanthropy.

Bungler said: 65 billion dollars stolen from 37,000 clients.

Laugher said: both used the ethos of wealth as credibility.

Bungler said: one used it to give. One used it to take.

Laugher said: Madoff refused to explain his strategy. The mystery protected the fraud.

Bungler said: Buffett and Gates refused to not explain. They made the pledge public. The transparency was the strategy.

Laugher said: so publicity protected the pledge the way mystery protected the fraud.

Bungler said: yes. Opposite uses of the same axis.

Laugher said: transparency again.

Bungler said: yes. Transparency again.

...

*Scene Five*

Bungler said: second example. 2011 to 2019. Palo Alto, California. A company called Theranos claimed to have developed technology that could run hundreds of medical tests from a single drop of blood. The founder was Elizabeth Holmes.

He looked at his notes.

He said: the board of directors included former secretaries of state, a former secretary of defense, and decorated military generals. The ethos was constructed from the most credentialed people available. Holmes appeared on magazine covers. The mystery of the proprietary technology — the Edison machine, the nanotainer — was protected by non-disclosure agreements that prevented scrutiny. Patients received incorrect test results. A patient whose Theranos test falsely indicated HIV infection spent months in terror. A patient whose test indicated a

thyroid problem that did not exist was prescribed unnecessary medication. Holmes was convicted of fraud. The arete of the mission — democratizing healthcare, making blood testing affordable for everyone — was the language of the enterprise from its founding.

He said: ethos of the board. Mystery of the proprietary technology. Arete of the democratizing mission. The mission statement was not incidental to the fraud. It was the first thing anyone heard.

...

### *Scene Six*

Laugher said: 2015. London. The Governor of the Bank of England gave a speech at Lloyd's of London, the center of global insurance. He titled it *Breaking the Tragedy of the Horizon*.

He looked at his notes.

He said: he argued that the time horizons of financial markets were too short to price climate risk, and that this created a systemic financial vulnerability. The ethos of the Governor of the Bank of England speaking at Lloyd's was precisely matched to the audience — the people who priced risk for a living. The mystery of the horizon: why do we not see the risk that is coming when it is visible in the data. The call to action: price it now, before the market forces you to. The speech led directly to the creation of the Task Force on Climate-related Financial Disclosures, which now shapes how major corporations report climate risk to investors.

He said: the rhetoric moved financial institutions that environmental advocacy had not moved, because it was addressed to them in their own language, about their own professional interest in accurate risk pricing. Ethos of the central banker at the insurance market. Mystery of the horizon. Call to action in the language of financial risk.

...

*Scene Seven*

Bungler said: Holmes said she was democratizing healthcare.

Laugher said: Carney said financial markets could not price a risk they could not see.

Bungler said: both used arete — the appearance of a mission larger than profit.

Laugher said: one mission was fraudulent. One was genuine.

Bungler said: from the outside they sounded identical.

Laugher said: yes. Before the evidence.

Bungler said: and by the time the evidence arrived for Theranos, patients had received wrong test results.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: the strategies made genuine and fraudulent missions indistinguishable in the moment when the distinction mattered most.

Laugher said: yes. That is what the strategies do when they are deployed skillfully enough. They create a condition in which the truth underneath cannot be evaluated from outside.

Bungler said: which is what they are designed to do.

Laugher said: or what they do whether designed to or not.

Bungler said: yes. We have been through that.

. . .

*Scene Eight*

Laugher said: the fund manager who killed himself.

Bungler said: yes.

Laugher said: he had trusted the ethos. He had directed clients to Madoff. He believed the returns were real.

Bungler said: yes.

Laugher said: so when it collapsed he had participated in the harm of his clients without knowing he was doing it.

Bungler said: yes.

Laugher said: he was inside the propaganda before he became its instrument.

Bungler said: yes. That is what we said about the tobacco executives.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: it keeps appearing. The person who deploys the harm without knowing they are deploying it because they believed what they were told.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: which means the harm spreads through layers of people who each believed what the layer above them believed.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: and at some point in the chain there is someone who knows the truth and has chosen not to share it.

Laugher said: yes. At some point there is always that person.

Bungler said: finding that person is what we are supposed to be doing.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: we have not found them.

Laugher said: no. Not yet.

# Propaganda Propaganda

## Chapter Fifteen — Finance: The Promise

### *Scene One*

Bungler said: words moved markets.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: Jerome Powell said a specific number of words and the global economy stabilized.

Laugher said: we will use our tools to their fullest extent.

Bungler said: nine words. And the undefined upper limit did the work before a single tool was deployed.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: I want to think carefully about that. Language as the instrument of financial stabilization. Not policy. Language.

Laugher said: language is always policy in finance. What a central banker says moves markets because markets believe the central banker will do what they say.

Bungler said: so the language works because of the history behind it.

Laugher said: yes. The mechanism is not the words alone. It is the words plus the credibility plus the track record plus the institutional authority plus the specific moment of maximum fear.

Bungler said: that is a great deal of work for nine words.

Laugher said: yes. That is what ethos does.

...

*Scene Two*

Bungler opened his notebook.

He said: 1995 to 2001. WorldCom. The second-largest long-distance telephone company in America. Its chief executive was celebrated. Its acquisition of MCI in 1998 was the largest merger in American history at the time.

He looked up.

He said: WorldCom inflated its assets by approximately eleven billion dollars by treating operating expenses as capital expenditures. The accounting manipulation made the company appear significantly more profitable than it was. The ethos of scale protected the fraud from scrutiny — a company this large, with this many employees, with these institutional investors, could not be fundamentally dishonest. When it collapsed in 2002 it was a larger bankruptcy than Enron. Thirty thousand employees lost their jobs. Investors lost approximately 180 billion dollars.

He said: ethos of scale. And anaphora — the quarterly earnings calls, the analyst presentations, the consistent narrative of expansion across years. The repetition made scrutiny feel like missing the story rather than doing the work of verification. The company kept growing. The story kept repeating. The growing and the repeating confirmed each other.

...

*Scene Three*

Laugher said: 2020. March. The COVID pandemic had frozen global financial markets. The Federal Reserve needed to act immediately and needed markets to believe it would act at whatever scale was necessary.

He looked at his notes.

He said: the Chairman of the Federal Reserve said: we will use our tools to their fullest extent. Nine words. The specific rhetoric of the

commitment: not a promise of an outcome, a promise of commitment to act. The ethos of the institution — the Federal Reserve had intervened decisively in 2008 and the market knew this. The mystery of fullest extent — the undefined upper limit that markets interpreted as unlimited. The call to action addressed to markets: do not panic, we are here.

He said: the Fed's balance sheet expanded from four trillion to nine trillion dollars in two years. Financial markets stabilized within weeks. The unemployment rate, which had reached 14.7% in April 2020, fell below 4% by the end of 2021. The rhetoric of the commitment did half the work before the actual tools were deployed. Ethos of the institution. Mystery of the undefined upper limit. Call to action addressed to markets.

He closed his notes.

...

#### *Scene Four*

Bungler said: WorldCom used the ethos of growth to hide eleven billion dollars in fraud.

Laugher said: Powell used the ethos of the Fed to stabilize the global economy with nine words.

Bungler said: both used institutional authority to move enormous amounts of money.

Laugher said: one fraudulently. One legitimately.

Bungler said: the mystery of WorldCom was complexity hiding fraud. The mystery of Powell was an undefined upper limit making the commitment credible.

Laugher said: both mysteries moved money. In opposite directions.

Bungler said: the direction again.

Laugher said: always the direction.

Bungler said: and both required existing history to work. WorldCom needed the history of growth to make the ethos of scale credible. Powell needed the history of 2008 to make fullest extent feel like unlimited.

Laugher said: yes. The rhetoric is not free-floating. It is attached to everything that came before.

Bungler said: which means the same words mean different things from different mouths in different moments.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: so the words are not the variable. The history attached to the words is the variable.

Laugher said: yes. And the truth the words are pointing toward.

Bungler said: yes. Both.

...

### *Scene Five*

Bungler said: second example. 2019 to 2023. Silicon Valley Bank. The bank invested depositor funds heavily in long-term government bonds during a period of near-zero interest rates. When the Federal Reserve raised rates rapidly, the bonds lost value. The bank was sitting on unrealized losses of approximately fifteen billion dollars against equity of approximately sixteen billion.

He looked at his notes.

He said: the bank had passed regulatory stress tests. It had a respected board. It served the most prestigious venture capital firms and technology startups in the world. The ethos of the client list protected the bank from scrutiny — if the most sophisticated investors in America trusted this bank, who was an ordinary depositor to question it. When the losses became public in March 2023, forty-two billion dollars was withdrawn in a single day. The Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation seized the bank. The false dilemma among depositors: either you trust the bank or you are the person who started the run. Once the run started,

not withdrawing was irrational. The slippery slope was self-fulfilling.

He said: ethos of the client list. False dilemma between trust and panic that collapsed into panic when enough depositors chose simultaneously. The sophisticated investors who were supposed to reassure ordinary depositors were the first to withdraw.

...

*Scene Six*

Laugher said: 2004. Mountain View, California. Google was preparing for its initial public offering. The founders, Larry Page and Sergey Brin, published a letter to potential investors. They titled it An Owner's Manual for Google's Shareholders.

He looked at his notes.

He said: the letter used the ethos of founders who had built something demonstrably valuable. The mystery of the algorithm they would not fully explain. The specific rhetoric of honesty about their unconventional intentions — they said directly: we may make decisions that sacrifice short-term financial results for long-term benefit. They said: do not be surprised if we do things that seem strange. The letter was a call to action: invest in us if you share our values, do not invest if you do not. The offering raised 1.67 billion dollars. The company's market capitalization subsequently exceeded one trillion.

He said: ethos of the founders. Mystery of the algorithm. Call to action that sorted investors by alignment of values rather than pursuing every available dollar. The honesty about what they would and would not do was itself the rhetorical strategy.

He closed his notes.

...

*Scene Seven*

Bungler said: Silicon Valley Bank's false dilemma — trust the bank or start the run — became self-fulfilling once enough people chose panic simultaneously.

Laugher said: Google's call to action sorted investors by values before the first share was sold.

Bungler said: both used the audience's assumptions to produce the outcome.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: SVB used the assumption that sophisticated investors signal safety. Google used the assumption that honest founders signal trustworthiness.

Laugher said: one assumption was wrong. The sophisticated investors withdrew first.

Bungler said: one was right. The investors who shared the founders' values stayed.

Laugher said: the assumption is the variable.

Bungler said: the truth underneath the assumption.

Laugher said: yes. The assumption that sophisticated investors signal safety was wrong because the sophisticated investors were rational actors protecting their own deposits, not signals for ordinary depositors to read.

Bungler said: the assumption that honest founders signal trustworthiness was right because the founders were actually honest about what they intended.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: so the truth underneath the assumption determines whether the assumption produces good or harm.

Laugher said: yes. Again.

...

### *Scene Eight*

Bungler said: fullest extent.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: Powell did not define it. The mystery was the instrument.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: and the mystery worked because the history of 2008 gave it weight. The Fed had acted at scale before. The undefined promise was credible because the defined actions had been real.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: so the mystery requires truth to function. Or history that the audience believes represents truth.

Laugher said: yes. And if the history was itself built on false actions, the mystery would collapse.

Bungler said: as WorldCom's did.

Laugher said: yes. The history of growth was real. The accounting was false. When the accounting was exposed the history could not sustain the ethos.

Bungler said: the truth underneath the history is the foundation.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: and if the foundation is false the whole structure eventually falls.

Laugher said: eventually.

Bungler said: how long is eventually.

Laugher said: Madoff ran for decades. The sugar industry's false science ran for fifty years.

Bungler said: eventually can be a very long time.

Laugher said: yes. Long enough to do enormous harm before the foundation fails.

Bungler said: yes.

# Propaganda Propaganda

## Chapter Sixteen — Finance: The System

### *Scene One*

Bungler said: LIBOR.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: \$350 trillion in financial contracts worldwide.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: our mortgages were in that number.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: we paid slightly more or slightly less than the correct interest rate for years without knowing it.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: and never felt it.

Laugher said: no. The harm was too distributed to feel.

Bungler said: is harm that cannot be felt still harm.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: prove it.

Laugher said: nine billion dollars in fines suggests someone thought so.

...

### *Scene Two*

Bungler opened his notebook.

He said: 2008 to 2012. Multiple major banks globally. The London Interbank Offered Rate — LIBOR — was the benchmark interest rate used to price an estimated 350 trillion dollars in financial contracts worldwide. Mortgages, student loans, credit cards, derivatives. It was set daily by a panel of banks reporting what rate they could borrow at.

He looked up.

He said: traders at multiple banks colluded to manipulate their submissions to benefit their own trading positions, or to make their banks appear more financially healthy than they were during the financial crisis. The manipulation affected interest rates paid by ordinary borrowers. The phronesis of the process — the appearance of practical wisdom in the rate-setting mechanism — made the manipulation invisible. It looked like a technical process conducted by experts. It was traders on instant messenger arranging to move a number. Banks paid over nine billion dollars in fines. The harm distributed across hundreds of millions of contracts is incalculable as a total.

He said: phronesis — the appearance of sophisticated technical process that no ordinary person needed to understand. The complexity as the protection. The expertise as the shield.

...

### *Scene Three*

Laugher put his notes on the table.

He said: 1999 to 2002. Seattle, and then globally. The World Trade Organization's Seattle ministerial in 1999 was disrupted by mass protests. A journalist named Naomi Klein published a book in 2000 called *No Logo*. It argued that corporate branding had become a form of propaganda obscuring labor conditions in global supply chains.

He looked at his notes.

He said: Klein used the specific rhetoric of the brand against itself. The mystery: what is actually behind the logo. The call to action: follow the supply chain. The ethos she deployed was not academic but

journalistic — she had gone to the factories, she had talked to the workers. The book sold over a million copies and became the intellectual foundation of the fair trade movement, the sweatshop accountability campaigns, and the supply chain transparency requirements that major corporations now face. The hyperbole — corporations are colonizing public space — was productive enough to force corporate responses even where it was overstated.

He said: mystery of what is behind the brand. Ethos of the journalist who went to the source. Hyperbole that forced a response even from those who disputed it.

He closed his notes.

...

*Scene Four*

Bungler said: LIBOR manipulated the interest rate on 350 trillion dollars in contracts without anyone noticing for years.

Laugher said: Klein's single question — what is actually behind the logo — made supply chain transparency a corporate obligation.

Bungler said: both used complexity. LIBOR hid behind it. Klein dismantled it by naming it.

Laugher said: yes. Mystery used to conceal versus mystery used to expose.

Bungler said: the same tool.

Laugher said: the same tool. In opposite directions.

Bungler said: toward harm.

Laugher said: toward accountability.

Bungler said: and the accountability produced by Klein's question is now itself subject to manipulation. Companies publish supply chain transparency reports. The reports use the appearance of transparency without necessarily delivering it.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: so the corrective generates its own version of the problem it was correcting.

Laugher said: yes. The slippery slope runs in every direction.

Bungler said: yes. In every direction simultaneously.

...

*Scene Five*

Bungler said: second example. 2015. Germany. Volkswagen installed software in eleven million diesel vehicles worldwide that detected when the car was being tested for emissions and altered engine performance to pass the test. In normal driving the cars emitted up to forty times the legal limit of nitrogen oxides.

He looked at his notes.

He said: the company had built its entire marketing identity around clean diesel. The ethos of German engineering. The arete of environmental responsibility. The practical claim that you did not have to choose between performance and environmental conscience because Volkswagen had solved that problem for you. The false dilemma made explicit in the marketing: you either sacrifice one or choose Volkswagen and have both. Researchers at MIT estimated the excess emissions would cause approximately 59 premature deaths in the United States alone. Volkswagen paid approximately 33 billion dollars in fines and settlements globally.

He said: arete — the appearance of virtue built into the product identity. The environmental positioning was not incidental decoration. It was the fraud. The mission statement was the lie.

...

*Scene Six*

Laugher said: 2008. September and October. The global financial system was collapsing. The Federal Reserve and Treasury needed Congress and the public to support an emergency intervention.

He looked at his notes.

He said: the Federal Reserve Chairman told congressional leaders in a private meeting: if we do not act, we may not have an economy on Monday. That sentence was reported widely and became part of the record. The hyperbole was not hyperbole. The Chairman had spent his academic career studying the Great Depression and understood precisely what was happening. The ethos of the man who had prepared his whole life for this moment. The mystery of what happens if we do not act, left deliberately unanswered to allow each listener's imagination to fill it in. The call to action was the TARP legislation — 700 billion dollars to stabilize the financial system. Initially rejected by the House. Passed on the second vote. The financial system did not collapse.

He said: hyperbole that was accurate. Ethos of the prepared man. Call to action in a room where the stakes were undeniable. The populations protected: depositors, pension funds, anyone who depended on the credit system to function.

He closed his notes.

...

### *Scene Seven*

Bungler said: Volkswagen used arete — the appearance of environmental virtue — as the fraud itself.

Laugher said: Bernanke used hyperbole — if we do not act we may not have an economy on Monday — that was not hyperbole.

Bungler said: the arete was false. The hyperbole was true.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: one used virtue to sell eleven million defeat devices.

Laugher said: one used alarm to prevent the collapse of the global financial system.

Bungler said: same strategies.

Laugher said: same strategies. Different truth underneath.

Bungler said: I have said that many times.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: and it is still the answer.

Laugher said: yes. It keeps being the answer. We have been through sixteen chapters and it keeps being the same answer.

Bungler said: the truth underneath determines whether the rhetoric produces good or harm.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: and the truth underneath cannot always be verified from outside.

Laugher said: no.

Bungler said: and the strategies are designed — or function — to make verification seem unnecessary.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: so the answer is both simple and impossible to act on.

Laugher said: yes. That is what we have found.

. . .

### *Scene Eight*

Bungler closed his finance notes. He said: four worlds.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: academia, public health, media, finance.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: in every world the strategies appear working in both directions.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: in every world the same answer appears.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: and the answer does not resolve the question. Knowing that the truth underneath is the variable does not tell you how to verify the truth underneath.

Laugher said: no. It does not.

Bungler said: the eighteen year old paid for an answer.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: we have a variable.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: that is not the same as an answer.

Laugher said: no. It is not. But it is more than we had when we opened the envelope.

Bungler said: three weeks left.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: and whatever we have found, we have to put it on a public forum for 340,000 people.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: and whatever we put there will use the strategies.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: whether we intend to or not.

Laugher said: yes. Whether we intend to or not.

# Propaganda Propaganda

## Chapter Seventeen — The Briefs Examined

### *Scene One*

Solver put a document on the table on a Monday morning without explanation. A printed transcript from a podcast. Owen Fitzpatrick. A guest named Alex Edmonds. A professor of finance. A book called *May Contain Lies*.

She said: read this.

Bungler read it. Laughter read it. They read in silence for twenty minutes. The coffee maker made the sound it made. Neither of them reached for their notebooks.

When Laughter finished he set the transcript down.

He said: naive realism.

Bungler said: yes.

Laughter said: the belief that we see the world exactly as it is and people who disagree are uninformed, irrational, or biased.

Bungler said: yes.

Neither of them said anything else for a while.

...

### *Scene Two*

Bungler said: I went looking for harm. I found harm.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: I did not look for good.

Laugher said: no.

Bungler said: I found what I went looking for.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: and I experienced finding it as confirmation that the harm side was correct. Not as the result of a search designed to find harm.

Laugher said: yes. That is what biased search does. The finding feels like discovery. It is actually retrieval of what you went in looking for.

Bungler said: and you.

Laugher said: yes. The same. I went looking for good. I found good. I experienced it as confirmation.

Bungler said: confirmation bias.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: about a case investigating misinformation.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: we have been investigating a mirror and not noticed we were in it.

Laugher said nothing. Then he said: yes. That is right.

...

### *Scene Three*

Bungler picked up his brief. He went through it example by example.

The opioid letter. He had presented it as proof that ethos causes harm. But the opioid letter was one mechanism of harm among many. He had selected it because it was clear, because it was documented, because it demonstrated ethos being weaponized. He had not selected examples of ethos working honestly in medicine. Those existed. He

knew they existed. He had not looked for them.

The Lancet. The Wakefield study. He had presented it as proof of institutional failure. The Lancet had also published work that saved lives. He had not included that.

He went through all thirty-six examples. In each one he found the same structure: he had selected the case that most clearly demonstrated harm. He had not selected cases that complicated the demonstration.

He said: biased search. Thirty-six times.

Laugher said: yes.

...

#### *Scene Four*

Laugher picked up his brief. He went through it the same way.

John Snow's map. He had presented it as proof that ethos of evidence saves lives. He had not included the fact that Snow's correlation was not causation, that the outbreak was already declining, that the map's argument was technically a logical fallacy that happened to produce the right intervention.

Jonas Salk. He had presented the vaccine and the could you patent the sun line as proof that arete produces good outcomes. He had not examined whether arete without good outcomes underneath it would produce the same effect — which was exactly what Theranos demonstrated.

He went through all thirty-six. In each one he found the same structure.

He said: I selected for the most inspiring version of each example.

Bungler said: yes.

Laugher said: and left out the complications.

Bungler said: yes.

Laugher said: thirty-six times.

Bungler said: yes.

...

*Scene Five*

Bungler said: the ladder of misinference. From the transcript.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: statement, fact, data, evidence, proof. Each rung a step further from the statement and a step further from universal truth.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: where did I step off.

He went through his brief again looking for the specific misstep. He found it in nearly every example. He had taken evidence — specific, documented, real harm in specific contexts — and presented it as proof. Universal. The opioid letter proves ethos harms people. The Lancet proves institutional failure. Rwanda proves anaphora kills.

He said: fourth rung. Evidence presented as universal proof. My evidence was real. My examples were documented. My harm was genuine. And I presented it as proof that the strategies always harm when the evidence only showed that they harmed in these specific contexts.

Laugher said: yes. I did the same thing. My good examples were real. And I presented them as proof that the strategies always help.

Bungler said: same rung. Both of us.

Laugher said: yes.

...

*Scene Six*

Bungler read Laugher's brief looking for the logical fallacies he had identified weeks ago in conversation.

John Snow's map — correlation presented as causation. Still there.

Could you patent the sun — appeal to emotion. Still there.

How dare you — ad hominem addressed to an entire generation. Still there.

The Birmingham Campaign — a planned confrontation designed to manufacture outrage.

He said: many of your examples are logical fallacies.

Laugher said: yes. You said that before.

Bungler said: I am saying it now having read the Edmonds transcript. The fallacies are in the brief. And the brief argues that the good outcomes justify the fallacies. But the brief does not acknowledge that it is making that argument. It presents the good outcomes as if the fallacies were not present.

Laugher said: yes.

He picked up Bungler's brief.

He said: and your harm examples use logical fallacies to demonstrate the harm of logical fallacies.

Bungler said: which ones.

Laugher said: LIBOR. You used a slippery slope — poverty is fatal — to argue against the slippery slope. Rwanda. You used anaphora — 800,000, 100 days, the radio, the voice — to argue against anaphora.

Bungler opened his notebook. He did not write anything.

He said: yes.

...

### *Scene Seven*

Bungler said: we have confirmation bias about a case investigating confirmation bias.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: we used the strategies throughout the investigation.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: without knowing we were doing it.

Laugher said: until now.

Bungler said: our briefs are not evidence of harm and good. Our briefs are evidence of two men who went looking for opposite things and found them and called the finding an investigation.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: and now we have to publish something on the public forum in three weeks.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: using the strategies.

Laugher said: yes. We will use them whether we try to or not. That is what the Edmonds transcript establishes. Confirmation bias and black and white thinking account for the vast majority of misinformation. We are not exempt from our own subject matter.

Bungler said: no. We are not.

...

### *Scene Eight*

Laugher said: marbling. From the transcript.

Bungler said: yes.

Laugher said: something that is mixed. Not good up to a point and then bad. Not separable into good cholesterol and bad cholesterol. Genuinely mixed. Streaks of fat through the meat. You take a bite and you do not know whether you got the fat or the lean.

Bungler said: the strategies are marbled.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: we have been trying to separate them for seventeen chapters and they will not separate.

Laugher said: no. They will not.

Bungler said: because the same strategy produces harm and good depending on the truth underneath and the target and the context and the intention and the history attached to the words.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: and none of those variables is written on the tool.

Laugher said: no.

Bungler said: which means you cannot know from the outside whether the rhetoric you are receiving is aimed at the truth or away from it.

Laugher said: no. Not from the outside.

Bungler said: and you are always on the outside until you are persuaded. And once you are persuaded you are on the inside and the perspective has changed.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: that is the problem the eighteen year old sent us to find.

Laugher said: yes. I think it is.

# Propaganda Propaganda

## Chapter Eighteen — Naive Realism

### *Scene One*

Bungler arrived the next morning and said: I went through my brief last night.

Laugher said: so did I.

Bungler said: I found the strategies in it.

Laugher said: so did I.

They put their findings on the table. Two lists. What each man had found operating in his own work without knowing it was there.

Bungler looked at both lists. He said: we used the same strategies to reach opposite conclusions from the same starting question.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: and we did not notice.

Laugher said: no.

...

### *Scene Two*

Bungler read his list aloud.

Ethos — he had cited the authority of documented sources throughout. The New England Journal of Medicine, the Lancet, the BBC, the UN Fact-Finding Mission. He had used the institutional weight of his sources as argument. The sources were real. The

institutional weight was real. And he had used it rhetorically, to make the harm examples feel unchallengeable.

Mystery — he had built toward the Rwanda and Myanmar examples by withholding the scale until the reader was prepared. He had sequenced the examples to produce cumulative weight. The sequence was a rhetorical choice.

Anaphora — the repetition of when, where, who, why, how across all thirty-six examples. He had not done this consciously. It had felt like thoroughness. It was also anaphora.

Call to action — implicit in every example. This must stop. This must be understood. This must be named.

He put the list down.

He said: I used four strategies from the list without knowing I was using them. In a brief arguing that these strategies cause harm.

...

### *Scene Three*

Laugher read his list aloud.

Ethos of the result — he had used the outcomes as arguments. 200 million lives. 98% repayment. 50% reduction in SIDS deaths. The numbers were real. He had used them the way Purdue Pharma used the *New England Journal of Medicine* — as authority that foreclosed scrutiny.

Mystery — what do the most wholehearted people have in common, withheld until the audience was leaning forward. The Tank Man's unknown identity. The imam's change of mind. He had structured the good examples to produce the feeling of revelation.

Arete — the virtue of the people in his examples. Rachel Carson not mentioning she was dying. Jonas Salk not patenting the vaccine. He had used their moral character as argument for the outcomes they produced. The character was real. Using it as argument was arete.

Call to action — embedded in every example. This works. Use it.

He put the list down.

He said: I used four strategies in a brief arguing that these strategies produce good.

Bungler said: the same four.

Laugher said: yes. The same four. In opposite directions.

...

*Scene Four*

They compared the two lists side by side. Ethos. Mystery. Arete. Call to action. Both briefs. Identical strategies. Opposite conclusions from the same question.

Bungler said: the strategies do not determine the conclusion. The conclusion determines which examples you select and how you deploy the strategies.

Laugher said: yes. We started with opposite assignments and found opposite things and used the same tools to present them.

Bungler said: and called it an investigation.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: which it was. We went out. We found real things. We documented real harm and real good. The examples are not fabricated.

Laugher said: no. The examples are real.

Bungler said: but the briefs are not neutral documents.

Laugher said: no. They are the briefs of two men with opposite assignments who found what they were assigned to find and presented it with the tools available to human beings presenting arguments.

Bungler said: which are the tools on the list.

Laugher said: yes.

...

*Scene Five*

Bungler said: naive realism.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: I believed I was seeing the harm side of the strategies exactly as it is. I believed my brief was the accurate account and your brief was the result of going looking for good and finding it.

Laugher said: and I believed the same about mine and yours.

Bungler said: we were both right about the other.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: and both wrong about ourselves.

Laugher said: yes. That is what naive realism is. You cannot see it in yourself. You can only see it in others. And seeing it in others feels like clarity rather than a symptom of the same condition.

Bungler said: yes.

Laugher said: we have been diagnosing each other for seventeen chapters.

Bungler said: yes.

Laugher said: and calling the diagnosis an investigation.

Bungler said: yes.

Neither of them found this funny.

. . .

*Scene Six*

Laugher said: she assigned us the sides.

Bungler said: yes.

Laugher said: she knew what we would find.

Bungler said: or she assigned the sides because the sides needed to be covered and she knew us well enough to know which one each of us would take.

Laugher said: those are different interpretations of the same action.

Bungler said: yes. And I cannot tell which one is correct. Which may also be a demonstration of something.

Laugher said: of what.

Bungler said: of the fact that the same action looks different depending on what you already believe about the person who took it. If I believe she is the client, her assignment of the sides looks like a designed demonstration. If I believe she is simply the most organized person in the office, her assignment of the sides looks like efficiency.

Laugher said: confirmation bias.

Bungler said: yes. Applied to Solver.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: which means I cannot determine from inside my own belief about her whether she is the client or not.

Laugher said: no. You cannot.

...

### *Scene Seven*

Bungler said: the question for the public forum.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: if these strategies work — are we using them, should we be using them.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: we are using them. We have established that. Thoroughly. In our own work.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: should we be.

Laugher said: I do not know.

Bungler said: that is the honest answer.

Laugher said: yes. But it is not a satisfying one.

Bungler said: no. And we have two weeks.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: and we cannot answer the question without using the strategies to answer it.

Laugher said: no. We cannot. Every sentence we write will use at least one of them. Every argument we make will be confirmation bias selecting evidence for a position we already hold.

Bungler said: so what do we publish.

Laugher said: I do not know yet.

Bungler said: neither do I.

...

### *Scene Eight*

Bungler sat at his desk.

He looked at the \$100 bills in his drawer.

He thought about the eighteen year old who had counted them out and addressed an envelope to strangers chosen at random. He thought about what the eighteen year old had hoped would come back. An answer. A finding. Something that made the question smaller.

He did not have that.

What he had was a finding that the question was larger than it appeared when the envelope arrived. That the question included the investigators. That the tools the investigators used to investigate the tools were the tools under investigation. That you could not stand outside the propaganda to examine it because the examination was itself propaganda.

He was not sure this was what the eighteen year old had paid for.

He thought it might be the most honest thing anyone could have sent back.

He was not sure that was the same as what was owed.

# Propaganda Propaganda

## Chapter Nineteen — The Strategies in the Briefs

### *Scene One*

Bungler said: two weeks.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: we know we used the strategies. We know our briefs are exhibits of confirmation bias. We know the answer is marbled and cannot be separated into clean components. We know that the truth underneath determines whether the rhetoric harms or helps and that the truth underneath cannot always be verified from outside.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: that is what we have.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: is it enough to publish.

Laugher said: I do not know. But it is what we found. And we were paid to find something.

...

### *Scene Two*

Bungler went through his harm brief a third time. This time he was not looking at the examples. He was looking at the structure. The way he had organized the presentation. The sequencing. The language.

He found ethos in the first sentence of the first example. He had opened with the New England Journal of Medicine not because it was the most important element of the opioid case but because it was the most credible. He had led with authority. That was a rhetorical choice.

He found mystery in the sequencing toward Rwanda. He had saved the most extreme harm example for later, building toward it, letting the earlier examples prepare the reader. That was structure in service of impact. That was mystery withholding the full weight until the reader was prepared to receive it.

He found anaphora in the repetition of when, where, who, why, how. He had thought this was methodology. It was also rhythm. Rhythm accumulates weight. Weight is persuasion.

He found call to action implicit in every closing line. He had not stated a call to action. He had not needed to. The examples made the call themselves.

He marked all of it.

...

### *Scene Three*

Laughter went through his good brief the same way.

He had opened the John Snow example with 500 people dying per week. That number first. Not the map, not the methodology, not the epidemiological context. The body count. He had led with the scale of suffering to make the solution feel necessary. That was a rhetorical choice about what to put first.

He had described Jonas Salk's could you patent the sun as a rhetorical move that was not accidental. He had said Salk understood what he was doing. He had praised the rhetorical sophistication of a man who chose the public good. That was arete deployed in service of arete as an argument.

He had withheld the Tank Man's identity as a feature of the example. Unknown, fate unknown. He had used the mystery of the man as the argument for the power of the image. But in doing so he had used the same mystery rhetorically that he was presenting as an example of mystery working for good.

He marked all of it.

...

*Scene Four*

They put the two marked briefs on the table side by side.

The marks were everywhere. Every example in both briefs carried at least two strategies from the list. Some carried four or five.

Bungler said: the briefs are not evidence of harm and good. They are demonstrations of the investigation being conducted with the tools under investigation.

Laughter said: yes.

Bungler said: which makes them evidence of something more fundamental.

Laughter said: that you cannot investigate the strategies from outside them.

Bungler said: yes.

Laughter said: because the investigation uses them.

Bungler said: yes.

Laughter said: which means anyone who investigates this question will produce the same result. Not the same finding about harm and good. The same meta-finding. That the investigation is inside the thing being investigated.

Bungler said: yes.

Laughter said: that is what we have to publish.

Bungler said: yes.

...

*Scene Five*

Bungler said: we publish both briefs. We publish the finding that both briefs use the strategies throughout. We publish the question: if these strategies work — are we using them, should we be using them. We say: we cannot answer this without using them to answer it. We include our own failure as part of the finding.

Laugher said: that is uncomfortable.

Bungler said: yes. It is also honest.

Laugher said: the contest.

Bungler said: yes. We invite responses. Six month deadline. Unanimous agreement wins the money. We say in the rules that unanimous agreement is probably not achievable. We say this because the question cannot be answered unanimously because the answer is marbled and every person who investigates it will use the strategies to investigate it and will find different things depending on what they went looking for.

Laugher said: we tell them the prize is probably unwinnable.

Bungler said: yes.

Laugher said: and they will enter anyway.

Bungler said: yes. Because call to action works even when you know it is a call to action.

Laugher said: which we will say in the publication.

Bungler said: yes.

...

*Scene Six*

The argument about Solver surfaced again. It surfaced every few days. It had the quality of an argument that both men knew would not resolve

and returned to anyway.

Bungler said: she is the client.

Laugher said: you cannot know that.

Bungler said: she assigned the sides. She put the Edmonds transcript on the table. She has been filing notes since the first day. She knows everything we have found before we tell her.

Laugher said: she knows us. She has worked with us for fifty years. She knows how we think. She anticipated the finding because she knows us well enough to anticipate it.

Bungler said: both things explain the same behavior.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: and I cannot tell from inside my own belief about her which explanation is correct.

Laugher said: confirmation bias.

Bungler said: yes. Applied to the question of whether she is the client.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: and that is itself part of the finding.

Laugher said: yes. The investigation cannot determine its own origin. That is also marbled.

...

### *Scene Seven*

Bungler said: we write the letter to the eighteen year old.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: embedded in the publication. Addressed directly. We tell them what we found. We tell them we used the strategies throughout. We tell them we cannot answer the question without using them. We tell them we are asking 340,000 people because the question is too large for two old men in one office.

Laugher said: and if the eighteen year old reads it.

Bungler said: then they will know we tried.

Laugher said: and that we found more than they expected.

Bungler said: possibly. Or less, depending on what they expected.

Laugher said: they chose us at random.

Bungler said: yes.

Laugher said: they did not expect any particular outcome.

Bungler said: no. Only an attempt.

Laugher said: and we made one.

Bungler said: yes. We made one.

...

### *Scene Eight*

Bungler picked up the handwritten list from the original packet. He had not looked at it in weeks. He read it again.

Propaganda Propaganda. Rhetorical Strategies. Ethos. Arete. Phronesis. Anaphora. Hyperbole. Logical Fallacies. False Dilemma. Slippery Slope. Ad Hominem. Mystery. Call to Action.

He said: someone compiled this list knowing how the machinery worked.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: and then gave it to an eighteen year old and asked them to find strangers who would investigate it.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: and the strangers used the machinery to investigate the machinery.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: and now we are going to publish the investigation on a public forum using the machinery and saying so.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: and the publication will use the strategies on 340,000 people who will read it through their own confirmation bias and find in it what they went looking for.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: and some of them will enter the contest and their entries will use the strategies and some of them will know it and most will not.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: and we will read the entries through our confirmation bias and disagree about which one is closest to the truth.

Laugher said: yes. Probably.

Bungler put the list down.

He said: it is propaganda propaganda all the way through.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: and we cannot step outside it.

Laugher said: no. We cannot.

Bungler said: knowing that is what we have.

Laugher said: yes. Knowing that is what we have.

# Propaganda Propaganda

## Chapter Twenty — The Question

### *Scene One*

Bungler said: one week.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: we have everything we are going to have.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: seventy-two examples across four worlds. Two briefs. Both compromised by confirmation bias. The finding that the strategies are marbled and cannot be separated into harm and good by examining the strategies themselves. The finding that the investigation used the strategies throughout without knowing it.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: and one question we cannot answer without using the strategies to answer it.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: that is what we have.

Laugher said: yes. That is what we have.

...

### *Scene Two*

Bungler said: are we using them.

Laugher said: yes. We established that. Thoroughly.

Bungler said: should we be using them.

Laughter said: I keep coming back to the same place on that question.

Bungler said: which is.

Laughter said: we cannot not use them. They are how persuasion works. They are how human beings present arguments to other human beings. Removing them would require removing language itself.

Bungler said: that is not an answer to should we.

Laughter said: no. It is an answer to can we. We cannot. Whether we should is a different question that the cannot forecloses.

Bungler said: if we cannot not do something then asking whether we should is pointless.

Laughter said: unless what we mean by should is: should we know we are doing it.

Bungler said: that is a different question.

Laughter said: yes. And it has a different answer.

. . .

### *Scene Three*

Bungler said: do we know we are using them.

Laughter said: now we do.

Bungler said: we did not when we started.

Laughter said: no.

Bungler said: and knowing changed something.

Laughter said: yes.

Bungler said: what did it change.

Laughter said: I have been thinking about that. When I found the strategies in my own brief last week I rewrote three of the examples. Not to remove the strategies — I could not. But to say in the text that I was using them. To name what I was doing.

Bungler said: I did the same.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: and the examples changed.

Laugher said: yes. They became more honest. Not less persuasive necessarily. But more honest. The reader could see what I was doing and evaluate it.

Bungler said: so the knowing allowed the reader to see the mechanism.

Laugher said: yes. Which is different from the mechanism being absent.

Bungler said: yes.

...

#### *Scene Four*

Bungler said: the publication itself will use the strategies.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: our introduction will use ethos. The authority of two investigators. The weight of seventy-two documented examples.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: the sequencing will use mystery. We will withhold the finding until the reader has been prepared by the examples.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: the contest is a call to action.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: and we will name all of this in the publication.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: so the publication demonstrates its own argument in the act of being read.

Laugher said: yes. If someone reads it carefully enough.

Bungler said: most will not.

Laugher said: no. Most will not. They will read it through their confirmation bias and find in it what they went looking for.

Bungler said: which is itself a demonstration of the argument.

Laugher said: yes.

...

*Scene Five*

Bungler went through his brief one more time looking for strategies he had not yet found.

He found twelve he had not flagged in the first pass. Phronesis in the introduction — he had positioned himself as someone who had spent two months examining this carefully, which was a claim to practical wisdom. Slippery slope in the LIBOR example — he had moved from the manipulation of one interest rate to the harm distributed across hundreds of millions of borrowers without establishing the causal chain clearly. Ad hominem embedded in the Enron example — he had described the executives in terms that made them character arguments rather than evidence arguments.

He said: I found twelve more.

Laugher said: I found nine.

Bungler said: the more you look the more you find.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: because they are in everything. Every sentence anyone writes makes rhetorical choices. Every choice is a strategy whether named or not.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: the list is not a list of things some people do. It is a description of what language does.

Laugher said: yes. I think that is right.

...

*Scene Six*

The argument about Solver.

Bungler said: she is the client.

Laugher said: you cannot know.

Bungler said: she put the Edmonds transcript on the table without explanation. She waited three weeks before she did it. She waited until we had found the briefs before she gave us the framework for understanding what was wrong with them.

Laugher said: she is a methodical person who does things in the right order. That does not make her the client.

Bungler said: she gave me harm and you good.

Laugher said: she knows us.

Bungler said: both things explain the same behavior. I know that. I cannot determine which is correct from inside my own belief about her. I know that too.

Laugher said: then let it go.

Bungler said: I cannot.

Laugher said: why.

Bungler said: because if she is the client then the investigation was designed. Someone designed it so that two men with confirmation bias would go looking for opposite things and find them and then discover that they had used the strategies throughout and call that the finding.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: and the finding would be the demonstration that you cannot investigate the strategies without using them.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: which is what the investigation found.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: which means either she designed it or the same result emerged from our own natures without anyone designing it.

Laugher said: and you cannot tell which.

Bungler said: no. And that may be the most important thing either of us has noticed in twenty chapters.

...

*Scene Seven*

Bungler said: the contest requires unanimous agreement to win the money.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: unanimous agreement will not be reached.

Laugher said: probably not.

Bungler said: the money will stay on the desk.

Laugher said: probably.

Bungler said: and we will say all of this in the rules.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: we will tell people the prize is probably unwinnable and they will enter anyway.

Laugher said: yes. Because the question is the thing, not the prize.

Bungler said: and because call to action works even when you know it is a call to action.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: and we will say that too.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: so the contest will demonstrate its own argument.

Laugher said: yes. Everything about this investigation demonstrates its own argument.

Bungler said: yes. We cannot step outside it to examine it. We are inside it. We have always been inside it.

Laugher said: yes.

...

*Scene Eight*

Bungler said: the eighteen year old.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: they sent us a question they could not answer.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: and we spent two months finding out that we could not answer it either.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: but we know more about why it cannot be answered than we did when we started.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: and we found that the investigation was itself an example of what it was investigating.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: is that enough.

Laugher said: I think it is more than the eighteen year old expected from two old men chosen at random.

Bungler said: yes. I think it might be.

He sat with the thought for a moment.

He said: one week.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: we write it down.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler opened his notebook to a fresh page. He wrote: What we found. He looked at the blank space below it.

He said: this will take some time to say accurately.

Laugher said: yes. But we have the time.

Bungler said: one week.

Laugher said: yes. One week is enough time to say something honestly.

# Propaganda Propaganda

## Chapter Twenty-One — One Week

### *Scene One*

Monday morning. One week to the public forum deadline.

Bungler laid everything on the table. Both briefs. The three notes from the original packet. The Edmonds transcript. The lists of strategies found in each brief. The draft publication they had been writing and revising for three days.

He said: this is what we have.

Laugher looked at it.

He said: yes.

Bungler said: and one week to make it honest enough to publish.

Laugher said: yes.

...

### *Scene Two*

Bungler said: I counted the examples last night.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: seventy-two. Across four worlds. Two briefs. Thirty-six each.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: and every example in both briefs uses at least two strategies from the list.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: without exception.

Laugher said: without exception.

Bungler said: and we did not know we were doing it for the first sixteen chapters.

Laugher said: no.

Bungler said: and knowing has changed the writing in the last three chapters.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: not by removing the strategies.

Laugher said: no. They are still there.

Bungler said: but by naming them.

Laugher said: yes. By naming them so the reader can see them.

...

### *Scene Three*

Bungler said: the letter to the eighteen year old.

Laugher said: yes. You said you wanted to write it.

Bungler said: I do. I have been thinking about what to say.

Laugher said: what have you settled on.

Bungler said: the truth. We do not know who you are. We do not know who gave you the packet. We do not know if you are a boy or a girl — we argued about this for two months and did not resolve it.

Laugher said: true.

Bungler said: we know you are eighteen years old and spent your parents' money on two old men chosen at random. We investigated the question. We used the strategies throughout the investigation. We cannot answer the question without using them. We are not sure anyone can. But we asked 340,000 people because the question is too large for two old men in one office.

Laugher said: yes. That is what to say.

Bungler said: and we owe them the money back if no one wins the contest.

Laugher said: we cannot return it. No address.

Bungler said: then we say that too.

...

*Scene Four*

The publication had been drafted and revised four times. Each revision had found more strategies operating in the language. Each revision had named more of them. The publication was becoming a demonstration of its own subject matter — a document that used the strategies to investigate the strategies and said so while doing it.

Bungler said: we publish both briefs. The three notes. The Edmonds transcript. Our finding that we used the strategies throughout. The question. The contest.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: and the letter to the eighteen year old.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: and we say: we used these strategies in this publication. We are using them in this sentence. We cannot help it. Here is the question. Can you answer it without using them.

Laugher said: no one can.

Bungler said: but they will try.

Laugher said: yes. They will try.

...

*Scene Five*

Solver said from her desk: Mr. Bungler.

He said: yes.

She said: should I be in the publication.

He said: we were discussing that.

She said: I assigned the sides. I put the transcript on the table. I have filed notes throughout.

He said: yes.

She said: if the investigation was designed those things look like design. If it was not they look like normal office procedure.

He said: yes. That is the problem.

She said: publish it under your names. The investigation was yours. The finding is yours.

He said: and if you are the client.

She went back to typing. She said: publish it under your names.

Laugher said quietly to Bungler: she did not say she is not the client.

Bungler said quietly: no. She did not.

...

### *Scene Six*

Bungler said: the contest rules.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: investigate the question. Submit findings to the public forum. Six month deadline. Unanimous agreement among respondents awards the prize money.

Laugher said: and the note that unanimous agreement is probably not achievable.

Bungler said: yes. We say it because it is true. The question cannot be answered unanimously because every person who investigates it will use the strategies to do so and will find what they went looking for.

Laugher said: and we say that in the rules.

Bungler said: yes.

Laugher said: so we invite people to compete for a prize we tell them they probably cannot win.

Bungler said: yes.

Laugher said: call to action.

Bungler said: yes. We name it.

Laugher said: and they will enter anyway.

Bungler said: yes. Because the question matters regardless of the prize.

Laugher said: or because call to action works even when you know what it is.

Bungler said: both.

...

*Scene Seven*

Bungler said: we cannot return the money. No address.

Laugher said: no.

Bungler said: if we do not publish we are thieves.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: so we publish.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: and what we publish will use the strategies.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: and we will say so.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: and that is the most honest thing available to us.

Laugher said: yes. It is.

Bungler said: it is not a complete answer.

Laugher said: no. It is not.

Bungler said: and it is what we have.

Laugher said: yes. It is what we have.

Both options were present. Publishing with the strategies operating and named. Not publishing and keeping money that was not theirs. The first was imperfect and honest. The second was not available. There was only the imperfect and honest thing.

. . .

*Scene Eight*

Bungler opened his notebook on Friday afternoon.

He wrote the final version of the publication's opening paragraph.

He read it to Laugher.

Laugher said: you used ethos in the first sentence.

Bungler said: yes. I know.

Laugher said: and mystery in the third.

Bungler said: yes. I know.

Laugher said: and call to action in the last line.

Bungler said: yes.

Laugher said: does it say so.

Bungler said: yes. In the next paragraph. It names all three.

Laugher read the next paragraph.

He said: yes. Better.

Bungler said: it is still using them.

Laugher said: yes. And saying so. That is the difference.

Bungler said: is it enough of a difference.

Laugher said: it is more than nothing.

Bungler said: yes. It is more than nothing.

He closed the notebook. He looked at the stack on the table. Everything they had found. Everything they had failed to find. The question they could not answer. The investigation that had become its own evidence.

He said: Monday we publish.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: and whatever happens after that happens after that.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: and we will not be able to control it.

Laugher said: no. We will not.

Bungler said: we never could.

Laugher said: no. We never could.

# Propaganda Propaganda

## Chapter Twenty-Two — The Crisis

### *Scene One*

Monday morning. Three days before the deadline.

Bungler read the publication from the beginning. He got to page four and stopped.

He said: we used ethos in the first paragraph.

Laughter said: yes. You named it.

Bungler said: and mystery in the second.

Laughter said: yes. Named.

Bungler said: and call to action in the third.

Laughter said: yes. Named.

Bungler said: and the naming does not remove them.

Laughter said: no. It does not.

Bungler said: so the publication uses the strategies and says it uses the strategies and the reader is still being persuaded by the strategies whether or not they read the part that names them.

Laughter said: yes.

Bungler said: and most will not read that part carefully.

Laughter said: no.

Bungler said: so we are using propaganda to tell people we are using propaganda.

Laughter said: yes. That is the crisis.

...

*Scene Two*

Bungler rewrote the introduction.

He showed it to Laughter.

Laughter said: you used anaphora in the second sentence. The repetition of we found.

Bungler rewrote it.

He showed it to Laughter.

Laughter said: you used phronesis — the claim to practical wisdom from two months of investigation — in the opening clause.

Bungler rewrote it.

He showed it to Laughter.

Laughter said: better. It still uses them.

Bungler said: yes.

Laughter said: but now it says so in the same sentence rather than the next paragraph.

Bungler said: is that enough.

Laughter said: it is more honest. It is not outside the problem.

Bungler said: nothing is outside the problem.

Laughter said: no.

...

*Scene Three*

Bungler said: the full crisis.

Laughter said: yes.

Bungler said: we cannot publish Bungler's brief alone. The harm argument uses the strategies to condemn the strategies. Self-refuting.

Laughter said: yes.

Bungler said: we cannot publish Laugher's brief alone. The good argument uses the strategies to defend them. Self-serving.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: we publish both and the reader receives two documents using propaganda to argue about propaganda and must choose between them.

Laugher said: which is exactly what the packet asked us to investigate.

Bungler said: yes.

Laugher said: so the publication is the investigation continued.

Bungler said: yes. Every option uses the strategies. There is no clean exit.

Laugher said: no. There is not.

Bungler said: and we cannot not publish. No return address. If we keep the money without publishing we are thieves.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: so we publish. The only question is what to publish and whether publishing it honestly is possible.

Laugher said: we have established that it is not fully possible.

Bungler said: and partially possible.

Laugher said: yes. Partially.

...

#### *Scene Four*

Bungler said: we publish everything. Both briefs. The three notes. The transcript. Our finding that we used the strategies throughout. The question. The contest. The letter to the eighteen year old. The impossibility of unanimous agreement stated in the rules. The fact that we are using the strategies in the act of publishing. All of it.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: and we say: we used these strategies throughout this investigation. We did not know we were doing it. We know now. We are using them in this sentence. We cannot help it. Here is the question. Can you answer it without using them.

Laughter said: and the answer is no.

Bungler said: yes. But we ask anyway.

Laughter said: because asking is all we have.

Bungler said: because asking is the honest thing and we were paid to do the honest thing.

Laughter said: we were paid to find the villain.

Bungler said: yes.

Laughter said: and.

Bungler said: and the villain is not in academia or public health or media or finance. The villain is the condition of being human and persuading. The villain is inside the investigation. Inside the investigator. Inside the reader.

Laughter said: that is not a satisfying villain.

Bungler said: no.

Laughter said: the eighteen year old will not be satisfied.

Bungler said: no. Probably not.

Laughter said: and we publish it anyway.

Bungler said: yes.

...

### *Scene Five*

Laughter said: what if we are wrong.

Bungler said: about what specifically.

Laughter said: about the villain being the condition rather than a person. The eighteen year old sent us looking for a person. Academia, public health, media, finance — those suggest a person or institution in

one of those worlds. We found a condition instead.

Bungler said: yes.

Laugher said: and a condition is not what was asked for.

Bungler said: no. But it is what we found.

Laugher said: or it is what our confirmation bias produced.

Bungler stopped.

He said: yes. That is also possible.

Laugher said: we went looking for a condition because we had been reading the strategies as conditions rather than as weapons of specific people. And we found a condition. Confirmation bias about the shape of the finding itself.

Bungler said: yes.

Laugher said: but we cannot now go back and look for a specific villain without that search also being shaped by what we already believe.

Bungler said: no.

Laugher said: so we are inside the problem we found.

Bungler said: yes. Still. Always.

Laugher said: yes.

...

### *Scene Six*

Solver said from her desk without looking up: the publication is due Thursday.

Bungler said: yes.

She said: is it ready.

Bungler said: nearly.

She said: what is missing.

Bungler said: the letter to the eighteen year old.

She said: write it.

He said: I have been.

She said: finish it.

He said: yes.

She went back to typing.

Laugher said quietly: she knows when things need to stop being revised and start being finished.

Bungler said: yes.

Laugher said: that is also a skill.

Bungler said: yes. It is.

. . .

*Scene Seven*

Bungler wrote the letter to the eighteen year old.

He wrote: We do not know who you are. We do not know who gave you the packet. We argued for two months about whether you were a boy or a girl. We never agreed.

He wrote: We know you spent your parents' money on two old men chosen at random. We investigated the question you sent us. We found that the strategies are marbled — not separable into harm and good. We found that the truth underneath the strategy determines the outcome and that the truth underneath cannot always be verified from outside. We found that we used the strategies throughout this investigation without knowing we were doing it. We found that knowing we were using them changed how we used them but did not stop us from using them.

He wrote: We cannot answer the question without using the strategies to answer it. We do not think anyone can. We have asked 340,000 people because the question is too large for two old men in one office.

He wrote: We tried to give you what we found rather than what would have satisfied you. We think that is what you paid for. We may be wrong about that.

He wrote: We could not return the money. There was no address. If no one wins the contest it stays on our desk. We are sorry about that.

He read it to Laughter.

Laughter said nothing for a moment.

He said: that is honest.

Bungler said: yes.

Laughter said: publish it.

...

### *Scene Eight*

Thursday. The publication went up on the Public Forum at nine in the morning.

340,000 subscribers.

Bungler and Laughter watched the view counter. Solver read the Gazette. The coffee maker made the sound it made.

At nine forty-seven the first comment arrived.

It said: this is the most interesting thing I have read in years.

Laughter said: ethos.

Bungler said: yes.

Laughter said: the commenter deployed ethos in their first response to a publication about ethos.

Bungler said: yes.

Laughter said: without knowing they were doing it.

Bungler said: probably not.

They watched the comments arrive. By noon there were over eight hundred. Bungler read them. He categorized them in his notebook.

He said: three out of eight hundred and forty-seven say we used the strategies throughout the investigation.

Laughter said: three.

Bungler said: yes.

Laugher said: out of eight hundred and forty-seven.

Bungler said: yes.

They sat with that number.

# Propaganda Propaganda

## Chapter Twenty-Three — The Decision

### *Scene One*

A journalist called the office three days after publication.

She had read the publication. She wanted to interview Bungler and Laughter. She said: your investigation is remarkable.

Bungler said: it is flawed.

She said: yes. That is what makes it remarkable.

She withheld which publication she worked for until Bungler had committed to the interview. She named three people who had already shared the post. She said: this needs to be heard.

Bungler said yes to the interview.

After he hung up Laughter said: she used three strategies on you in ninety seconds.

Bungler said: yes.

Laughter said: and you knew it.

Bungler said: yes.

Laughter said: and you accepted anyway.

Bungler said: because it will help the contest reach more people.

Laughter said: a call to action rationalizing a response to a call to action.

Bungler said: yes. I know.

...

*Scene Two*

The comments continued arriving for days. Bungler read them every morning. He categorized them in his notebook. The categories were the same categories he would have expected.

Readers who agreed with the harm brief ignored the good brief. Readers who agreed with the good brief ignored the harm brief. Readers who had strong prior views about a particular example argued about that example and not about the finding. Readers who found the contest irresistible entered immediately.

Three out of the first eight hundred and forty-seven had said: you used the strategies throughout the investigation.

By the end of the first week, out of four thousand two hundred comments, eleven had said it.

Laughter said: eleven.

Bungler said: yes.

Laughter said: out of four thousand two hundred.

Bungler said: yes.

Laughter said: and those eleven are the ones who read it as we intended it to be read.

Bungler said: yes.

Laughter said: and four thousand one hundred and eighty-nine read it as they intended to read it.

Bungler said: yes. That is the finding demonstrated in real time.

...

*Scene Three*

A comment arrived that said only: thank you. No name. No location. No further content.

Bungler said: the eighteen year old.

Laughter said: you cannot know that.

Bungler said: no.

Laugher said: confirmation bias.

Bungler said: yes. He marked the comment anyway.

...

*Scene Four*

Contest entries began arriving in the second week.

The first was from a professor of rhetoric at a university in Ohio. Four thousand words. Precise and academic. It cited sources. It used the ladder of misinference correctly. It concluded: the strategies are tools. Tools are morally neutral. The user determines the morality.

Bungler said: that is Laugher's argument.

Laugher said: it is a good argument.

Bungler said: it does not answer the should we question.

Laugher said: no. It reframes it. It says the question of the tools is the wrong question. The question is the user.

Bungler said: which is what we found. Somewhat.

Laugher said: yes. Somewhat.

The second entry was from someone who identified themselves as a high school student. Four hundred words. It described a history teacher who used mystery to make students care about history and asked: is a good teacher the same as a propagandist.

Bungler read it twice. He said: she is asking the question back at us.

Laugher said: yes. And she is right to.

Bungler said: she.

Laugher said: you still cannot know that.

Bungler said: no.

...

*Scene Five*

Solver read the publication at home the evening after it went live. She brought three notes to the office the next morning.

She put them on Bungler's desk.

He read them.

One: the contest requires unanimous agreement which you have said is probably not achievable. Explain in the publication why you chose an impossible standard.

Two: you have not said who sent the packet. You do not know. Say you do not know.

Three: the eighteen year old will read this. The letter addresses them. Make sure the letter says what actually needs to be said and not what sounds good.

Bungler read all three.

He said: she is right about all three.

He rewrote the relevant sections.

Laugher said: she does not say she is not the client.

Bungler said: no. She does not.

...

### *Scene Six*

Bungler wrote the addendum addressing Solver's three notes.

On the impossible standard: we chose unanimous agreement because we believed the question could not be answered unanimously and we wanted the prize to reflect the question. An unanswerable question deserves an unwinnable prize. We may be wrong about the unanimity. We may be wrong about the prize. We were not wrong about naming the difficulty.

On not knowing who sent the packet: we do not know. We have speculated throughout the investigation and named the speculation as speculation. This is the honest account.

On the letter to the eighteen year old: he read the letter again. He found three places where he had written what sounded good rather than what was true. He rewrote them. The letter became shorter and more direct. He preferred the longer version. He published the shorter one.

Laugher read the addendum.

He said: yes. That is better.

Bungler said: it is still using the strategies.

Laugher said: yes. And saying so.

Bungler said: yes.

...

### *Scene Seven*

The sixth week after publication. Contest entries still arriving. No unanimous agreement on anything. The money on Bungler's desk.

New cases had come to the office. Three in the first month. Referred by people who had read the publication. A company that believed its competitors were using propaganda against it. A school board wanting to understand how its communications were being received. An individual who wanted to understand their own confirmation bias.

Bungler handled the intake. His notes were wrong in the usual ways. He brought them to Solver. She read them. She asked questions. He went back out. He came back. The arrangement continued.

Different and the same.

...

### *Scene Eight*

Laugher said one afternoon: do you think the eighteen year old read it.

Bungler said: the thank you comment.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: I think so.

Laugher said: confirmation bias.

Bungler said: yes. And also possibly true.

Laugher said: yes. Confirmation bias and possibly true are not mutually exclusive.

Bungler said: no. They are not.

He looked at the money in his desk drawer. The same stack of bills that had arrived in the original envelope. He had not moved them since the publication went up. He was not sure what they represented now. Payment for work done. A prize no one had claimed. An obligation to someone whose address he did not have.

He said: if no one reaches unanimous agreement the money stays here indefinitely.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: and if someone does reach it we give it to them.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: and we still will not know if the investigation was right.

Laugher said: no. We will not.

Bungler said: the money is not connected to the answer.

Laugher said: no. It never was.

Bungler said: we knew that going in.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: and published it in the rules.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: and people entered anyway.

Laugher said: yes. They did.

# **Propaganda Propaganda**

## **Chapter Twenty-Four — Bungler and Laugher Still Arguing**

### *Scene One*

Six weeks after publication. The contest running. Entries arriving. No unanimous agreement.

An ordinary morning. Bungler at his desk. Laugher at his. Solver at hers.

Bungler said: I read three more entries last night.

Laugher said: and.

Bungler said: the professor from Ohio says the strategies are morally neutral tools. The user determines the morality.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: I disagree.

Laugher said: I know. Why.

Bungler said: because a hammer is a morally neutral tool. You can build a house or break a skull and the hammer has no preference. But the strategies are not hammers. They are more like language itself.

Laugher said: and language is not morally neutral.

Bungler said: no. Language is not morally neutral. Language has a direction built into it by the speaker. The direction is not in the words. It is in the choice of which words, which order, which withheld, which emphasized.

Laugher said: Orwell would agree.

Bungler said: yes. And Orwell used language to argue that language was being abused.

Laugher said: the same problem we have.

Bungler said: yes. The same problem we have. Still.

. . .

*Scene Two*

Laugher said: the high school student's entry.

Bungler said: yes.

Laugher said: the teacher who uses mystery to make students care about history. Is she a propagandist.

Bungler said: she is a teacher using rhetorical strategies to teach.

Laugher said: is that different from a propagandist using rhetorical strategies to propagandize.

Bungler said: yes.

Laugher said: how.

Bungler said: the truth underneath. The teacher is pointing toward actual history. The history is real. The mystery is in service of the real.

Laugher said: and the propagandist is pointing toward something else.

Bungler said: yes. Or pointing toward the real but selecting which real, in which order, for which effect.

Laugher said: as we did.

Bungler said: yes. As we did.

Laugher said: so the teacher and the propagandist are on a spectrum rather than in separate categories.

Bungler said: yes. With the truth underneath as the variable that places them.

Laugher said: and the truth underneath is not always visible from outside.

Bungler said: no.

Laughter said: so the student cannot always tell if she is being taught or propagandized.

Bungler said: no. She cannot.

Laughter said: and neither can we.

Bungler said: no. We cannot.

...

*Scene Three*

Bungler said: are we using them right now.

Laughter said: yes.

Bungler said: I used ethos in Scene One. I cited Orwell.

Laughter said: yes.

Bungler said: you used mystery in Scene Two. You withheld the point about the teacher until I had committed to the question.

Laughter said: yes.

Bungler said: we cannot stop.

Laughter said: no.

Bungler said: and we know it.

Laughter said: yes.

Bungler said: and knowing changes the using.

Laughter said: somewhat.

Bungler said: somewhat.

Laughter said: yes. Somewhat.

They had said this before. They would say it again. It did not become less true with repetition and it did not become more satisfying.

...

*Scene Four*

Laugher said: the advertising executive's entry.

Bungler said: yes.

Laugher said: he corrected himself. His second entry. He said knowing made him more effective not less harmful. And then he said: knowing without accountability is sophistication in service of harm.

Bungler said: yes.

Laugher said: so accountability is a variable we had not fully named.

Bungler said: we named honesty. We named transparency. We named the truth underneath. We did not name accountability separately.

Laugher said: they are related but not identical.

Bungler said: no. You can be honest about what you are doing and still not be accountable to the people you are doing it to.

Laugher said: yes. The behavioral scientists who manufactured fear during the pandemic were honest in their internal documents. They wrote it down. The perceived level of personal threat needs to be increased. They were not accountable to the people whose perceived threat they were increasing.

Bungler said: and if they had been.

Laugher said: perhaps they would have made different choices. Or the same choices differently.

Bungler said: write that down.

He wrote it down himself.

...

### *Scene Five*

Solver said from her desk: Mr. Bungler.

He said: yes.

She said: the contest has two hundred entries.

He said: yes.

She said: any closer to unanimous agreement.

He said: no.

She said: expected.

She went back to her work.

Laugher said: she knew.

Bungler said: yes.

Laugher said: from the beginning.

Bungler said: yes.

Laugher said: and said nothing.

Bungler said: what would she have said. Do not open the envelope. Do not take the case. You will spend two months finding out that you cannot answer the question and then publish that finding and it will be more honest than anything else you have ever published and less satisfying and the money will stay on your desk.

Laugher said: would you have believed her.

Bungler said: no.

Laugher said: no. So the investigation was necessary.

Bungler said: yes. The knowing required the finding. The finding required the investigation. The investigation required going out and coming back and arguing about every example and being wrong about the question and gradually becoming less wrong.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: which is also what the strategies do when they work honestly.

Laugher said: yes. When the truth underneath is pointing in the right direction.

...

### *Scene Six*

Bungler said: the argument is the same argument.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: we started with it in Chapter One. Poem or list. Villain or client. Boy or girl.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: harm or good.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: and we are still having it.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: and we know more than we knew when the envelope arrived.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: and the argument has not resolved.

Laugher said: no. It will not resolve.

Bungler said: that is the finding.

Laugher said: yes. The argument does not resolve. It continues with more information than it started with.

Bungler said: that is not nothing.

Laugher said: no. It is not nothing.

Bungler said: the eighteen year old paid for something. The something is: two old men who went out and came back and argued for two months and cannot tell you who the villain is but can tell you that the villain is not where you were looking and is also exactly where you were looking and is also inside the looking itself.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: and that they used the strategies throughout and knew it by the end and could not stop.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: and that knowing changed the using somewhat.

Laugher said: yes. Somewhat.

...

*Scene Seven*

Bungler opened his notebook.

He wrote: the argument continues.

He looked at it.

He said: that is the last entry.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: the case is closed.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: and the argument continues.

Laugher said: yes.

Bungler said: both things are true.

Laugher said: yes. Both things are true simultaneously and that is what we found.

The case closed. The argument continued. The money stayed in the drawer. The contest stayed open. New cases waited. The office was the office.

...

*Scene Eight*

The post arrived the next morning.

Solver sorted it.

One envelope. No return address.

She put it on Bungler's desk.

He looked at it.

He looked at Laugher.

Laugher looked at the envelope.

Bungler opened it.

Inside: money and notes.

Laugher laughed.