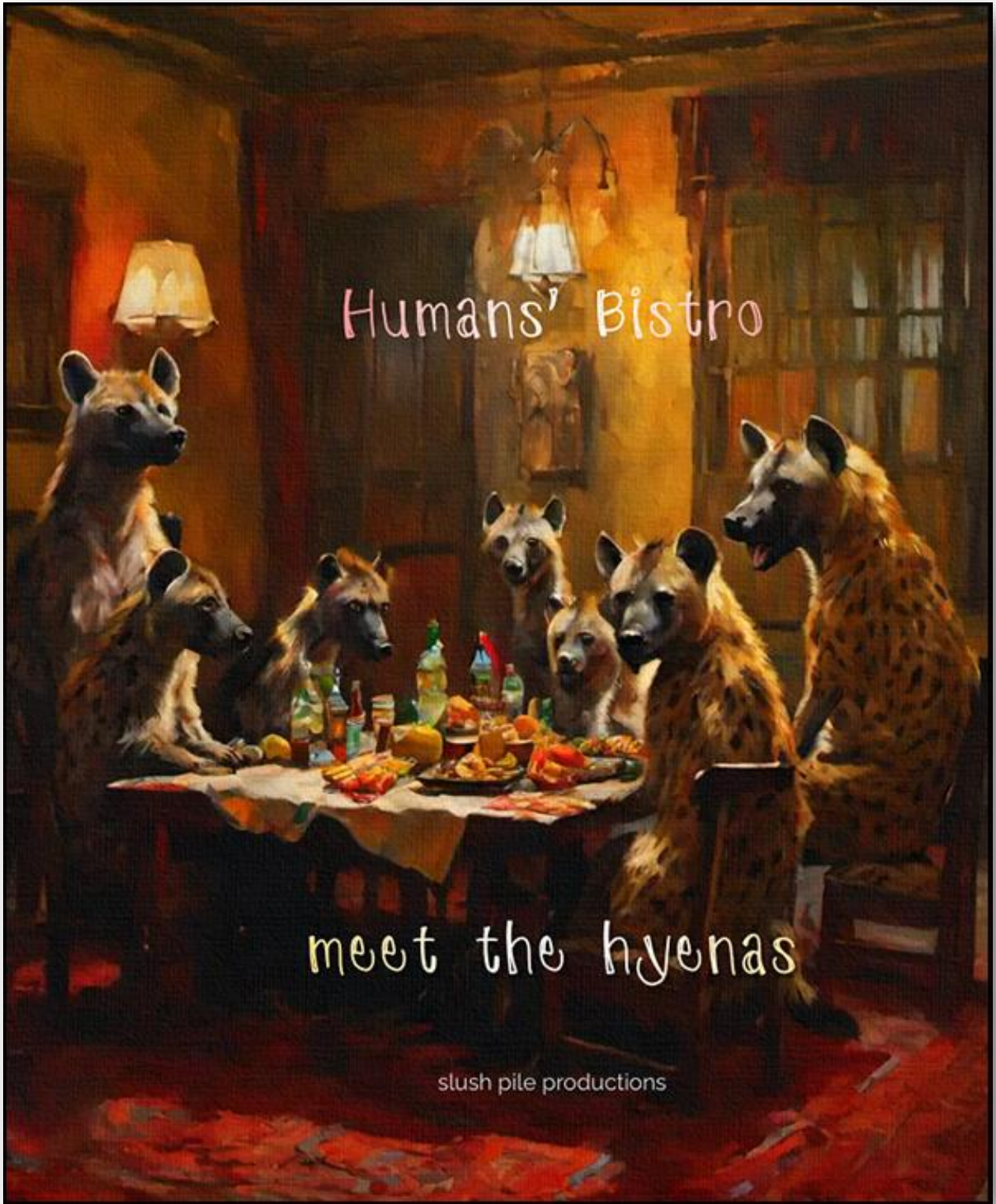


LINDSAY WINCHERAUK



HUMANS' BISTRO: MEET THE HYENAS

## MEET THE HYENAS



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I'm weighed down by a heavy burden, trapped in a state of inertia, unable to escape the grasp of depression. The constant worry about my family's financial situation adds weightiness to my distress.

Despite my best efforts, which include walking an impressive 30,000 steps each day, exercising at the fitness asylum, and engaging in activities like reading, writing, and dreaming, the cloud of depression refuses to dissipate.

In desperate need of some laughter, I find myself incapable of doing so.

I need to laugh. I can't. Valerie, who happens to be deaf is walking toward me – I can't see her.

*She's deaf, not blind, idiot.*

That doesn't make sense, I'm only half blind.

Valerie appears troubled, moving slowly like a snail. Recently, she had a serious health issue that required hospitalization. I don't know what it is – because I've forgone my goal of being ever kind, because I kind of don't like her, a sign of me failing, flailing, railing.

I grasp onto handrails when I walk down stairs. Every time.

I'm walking in the forest. The floor is slick. I fall forward. Hard. My face is about to smash into a root. I block my fall with my hands. It fucking hurts.

I'm walking in the woods on top of a fallen tree. The tree is slick. I slip. I start falling forward. Fortunately, I am able to grasp onto a standing tree, hugging it, swinging in a circle like a pole dancer, like a stripper. I take off my shorts.

I grasp onto railings when I walk down stairs now.

| Stroke |

I notice Valerie approaching, and behind her is an Asian man who appears to have a neurological disorder. He takes two steps forward and then shuffles (shuffling sounds) his right foot at an angle along the ground, resembling a football place kicker. His movements glacial – much like watching a block of ice melt when it is zero degrees.

In a previous writing, I imagined him being discovered by a professional football team and kicking a 65-yard field goal. I could go back and clarify this, but it's probably not necessary.

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I question whether I am being a dick by writing about Valerie and the place kicker.

*You weren't until you didn't capitalize "place kicker."*

Valerie looks up at me, her eyes filled with sorrow.

As Mr. Place Kicker overtakes her on her left, the sorrow in her eyes intensifies.

I feel terrible for witnessing this strange race and finding comfort in its absurdity.

Am I being a jerk?

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**A**s you can probably tell, I'm feeling a bit overwhelmed today. Whatever that means.

I recently received a job offer. Would you like to know how it went?

Sure.

## WhatsApp

"I'm Diana from the Recruitment department. I have a job for you (sic). Would you like to know more?"

"Yes, please."

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| Picture | We're hiring. No description.

"What's the company?"

"Before I tell you more, may I ask you some questions?"

Name: Gender: Age: Nationality:

"Can I tell you more, please! (sic)"

"No."

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I feel weighed down by everything. My family is going through financial uncertainty. How do we survive? Who can I turn to for help?

I decide to write an email to my former employer, humbly asking for assistance without burdening them with guilt. Do you know how hard that is to do when your life is in the shitter?

I'm pretty sure the grammar police won't let me use the word "shitter." They'd probably change it to "crapper."

Do I prefer that?

I'll ask. "Hey, me, which do you prefer, 'shitter' or 'crapper'?"

"63/37."

"That makes perfect sense."

I wonder how my former employer will react after reading my email.

Tears stream down my face.

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**W**e arrive at the Smith's house, a family of hyenas.

I can't remember if I gave them names before, so I'll do it now.

Meet mum and pop, Lloyd, and Margaret, their four lively children, Biff, Bill, Belinda (her, she, yee), and of course the friendly Wendal, or Mr. Wendal preferably.

And there's one more hyena, Cynthia, Margaret's secret lover.

By her being there, I think the secret may be out.

This ↑↑ is probably frowned upon in Florida.

I wonder if there's a market for Cynthia and Margaret's intimate videos?

I used the word "intimate" to trick the grammar software into compliance.

It worked.

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The Smiths, known for being the fiercest hunters in the wild for several decades, were approached by Jack the Jack-Rabbit, the leader of the Animal Kingdom, eight years ago.

Amazingly they didn't eat Jack. Probably because Jack has six lions for bodyguards.

Jack offered them the opportunity to move to Foodville, where they could feast on parasitic humans instead of relying on whatever they found in the wild.

They eagerly accepted.

Later in the story, you'll meet Cantaloupe, once again, the delectable vegan antelope who only eats cantaloupes. She adores the song "Mr. Wendal<sup>(1)</sup>" by Us3, and she becomes the apple of Mr. Wendal's (the hyena) eye. He frequents Hanover's Fine Dining to woo her and convince her he has changed his ways and now only desires human flesh and whatever Cantaloupe wants him to be.

An astronaut?

Probably not.

On every second Sunday, the Smiths invite Cantaloupe over for roast night, where they serve cantaloupe roasts that taste exactly like pot roast!

1) Don't you mean "Cantaloop" by Us3.

Sure, Cantaloupe does love that song as well, her all-time favourite, but she loves everything in the Us3 catalogue which happens to come close to rhyming with cantaloupe. I'm out. Drop the microphone.

You're typing.

Drop the keyboard then.

If I do that, how will I type?

From the floor.

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Now, let me tell you about Biff.

Biff left home at a young age on a full-ride field lacrosse scholarship to Lizard University.

He was the only non-lizard on the team.



Unfortunately, Biff was expelled from the university because he could consume 35 pounds of lizard meat in a single sitting.

That's all for now.

Cantaloupe loves playing Jenga.

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## CORPORATIONS CARING FOR THE PEOPLE (LOGIC DICTATES SARCASM)



Yesterday, I received news - my Instagram is under attack by trolls who are outraged because I posted videos of myself enjoying meals at McDonald's.

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Apparently, these trolls believe supporting McDonald's means supporting Israel, and they're determined to make their displeasure known.

Normally, I wouldn't condone willful ignorance, but lately, I've reached a point in my life, at the age of 63, where I simply can't handle any more news. These trolls can go to hell. I refuse to take their bait or engage in their willful ignorance, where they try to convince people, the world is divided into two sides and nothing else matters. I don't want to align myself with either side.

What I do know is the senseless violence we witness in the world is too heavy to comprehend. It is rooted in the darkness that resides within humanity.

Killing is wrong.

Revenge is wrong.

It doesn't matter who is responsible.

I can't fathom why we still struggle to grasp this simple truth.

**A**t 63 years old, my family is on the verge of homelessness. Every day, I desperately search for a solution to stop the financial bleeding caused by losing my job at the start of the pandemic. The company I dedicated fifteen years of my life to saw an opportunity to replace me with someone younger and cheaper. Poof, my career vanished.

Now, I find myself competing for menial jobs against people thirty years my junior.

Logically speaking, I don't stand a chance. But I keep trying.

Thankfully, I am a creative soul - a writer, an image creator. Yet, even in the creative world, technology is advancing rapidly, and artificial intelligence threatens to take over. Another blow to my hopes and dreams.

Still, I keep trying.

I've learned to stay away from the news. It's like venturing onto dangerous moors. Instead, I focus on my own little world.

Inside my apartment (for now), I sit at my desk and work.

I make mistakes, like turning on the TV to watch Morning Joe.

Joe seems to be on a rant, discussing major stores closing due to rampant theft. *He pretends to care about those living in tent cities*, but then he shifts his focus to organized crime and how they orchestrate these thefts through groups of thieves.

The stores don't know what to do, so they decide to close down, supposedly to protect their valued employees by putting them out of work.

Where is the logic in all this?

Joe continues his tirade, blaming weak lawmakers for not putting these thieves behind bars unless they steal over a certain amount.

*Apparently, stealing less than \$850 means they're back on the streets.*

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**B**ut here's the thing - if we truly got tough on crime and punished the thieves, not the organizers, wouldn't it send a message to those suffering and vulnerable individuals? Joe screams. They might think twice before stealing, and the hardworking employees corporations claim to care about could keep their jobs.

**Logic |in a weak sarcastic moment|:** And maybe, just maybe, the organized crime groups would be forced to recruit younger individuals again.

Joe doesn't mention any of that. I guess logic, *not the rapper*, hasn't infiltrated Joe's entitled thinking. I wonder if Joe realizes the poor people he wants to help and imprison in the same breath probably aren't watching his show to get his privileged stilted message. They're out there, homeless and suffering, and some might even be committing crimes to find warmth and shelter in jail instead of living outdoors on a day with a heavy rainfall warning. But of course, since they are homeless, they don't know about the rain that is coming their way.

What's wrong with a society that tries to solve complex problems by pointing fingers at the most vulnerable among us?

Still, I keep trying. I'm now one of the most vulnerable.

I know I shouldn't turn on the news, but curiosity gets the better of me.

Locally, in Vancouver, a major drug store is closing its doors due to constant shoplifting.

They claim it's to protect their employees, their most valuable asset.

Logic, please step forward.

**Logic:** I'm not everyone's logic, but maybe I'm yours. Let me ask you a few questions, and I'll incorporate your answers into my words, so we don't have to go back and forth.

How old are you? 63. Okay.

Why are you so passionate about this issue?

Because you lost your job at 60 and you're terrified for your future. That makes sense.

How many jobs have you applied for?

Over 100, and only the ones that see you as older have shown any interest. They assume you have connections they can exploit because of your age. It's disheartening.

Now, when the executive of a company appears on the screen and says, "We must close the stores to protect our people," you feel sickened.

Why?

Because putting more people out of work under the guise of caring is the exact opposite of what should be done. It will only lead to more suffering, more poverty, and, for heaven's sake, more shoplifting.

*News, can you lighten the mood and tell us something about Taylor Swift?*

No?

You're beyond terrified about your family's future. In fact, you're hoping your medication runs out, so you won't have an excuse to face the inevitable. Damn, when your cat's food runs out, she dies.

But still, you keep trying.

When the stores close, your impossible task of finding employment at 63 will become even more daunting, if not downright whatever the heck comes after impossible.

You feel like you're being pushed towards something worse, something rhyming with "Beth."

That's the reality of being 63 years old, on the brink of homelessness, when you watch the news, possibly for the last time.

I'm scared out of my mind.

If I become homeless, I won't survive. It's as simple as that.

I've tried pitching my story (Becoming Homeless at 63) to the news, but it doesn't seem to interest them. They seem to be too busy focusing on executives and talking heads who claim to solve complex societal issues by protecting products instead of people. *If only they threw the thieves in jail, poverty would disappear, and we'd be living in a utopia.*

Blame the poor, right?

I can't help but feel that the war on poverty is in full swing.

So, shut off the news. Care about the people you see suffering around you.

For now, I still have a roof over my head, but in a week or two, that will change, and I'll become just another dying, suffering, hopeless, statistic. All because I dedicated fifteen years to a company that saw me as expendable, easily replaced by someone younger and cheaper — on day one, of a once-in-a-century pandemic.

I don't want to die.

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**A**s I read the words, I just shared with you, a wave of sadness washes over me. It's like my depression settles on my lap, purring, but not in a comforting way, but an ominously predacious way.

It's a purring I can't quite describe, as if it's predatory and unsettling. I just wrote the word "predacious" without really knowing where it came from or what it means. Or if it even fits in this tome about animals. Maybe I should look it up while I sit here in this state of ennui, trying to shake your mind out of torpor. Is your mind in a state of torpor?

How many words did you have to look up in the last paragraph?

Be honest. I'm guessing: three.

I had to look up "predacious" myself, and it turns out it fits perfectly.

I may not be a genius, but I like to think I'm pretty close.

Though, a true genius wouldn't literally go around proclaiming their genius, would they?

Is it acceptable to boast about being a genius?

Probably not.

I apologize for burdening you with my family's troubles on these pages when all you want is to read about what's happening with the animals – and know if the grandkids are, okay?

I understand.

But as I mentioned before, life keeps moving forward, no matter how much garbage is thrown our way. And in my family's case, it feels like several dumpsters worth, like a future shopping center for our food – the full dumpsters. I hope that's not the case, because it would definitely suck. Unless the dumpsters are full, and not really dumpsters, but instead, a refrigerator in our home instead – that wouldn't suck.

Life doesn't stop just because you are creating a phantasmagorical fantasy land full of possibilities.

I'll only type for ten more minutes, today.

Starting now.

Oh no, now I only have nine minutes left. I must have dosed off.

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This part of the story might be a bit jumbled, but I'll figure it out later or play around with the timeline. I'm confident you will comprehend. Life is often jumbled, non-linear, kind of fucked up.

Mr. Wendal and Cantaloupe's love grew stronger with each passing day.

They would attend the Smith's "Cantaloupe Roast Feast" every Sunday and they proudly celebrated Cantaloupe's undefeated streak of thirty-seven Jenga games on Thursday game nights.



Cantaloupe even became a Scrabble queen, though Mr. Wendal teasingly suggested he was letting her win to manipulate her love for him.

And of course, there was Mr. Mustard in the study with the candlestick, a clue for another time. Or not. Probably not.

Their love had become so strong Cantaloupe started calling Mr. Wendal's parents by their first names, Lloyd, and Margaret, instead of Mr. and Mrs. Smith.

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But something felt off, like a dark cloud lurking in the background. Mr. Wendal began to withdraw into despondency, and not even Cantaloupe's efforts or oral acumen could snap him out of it.

"What's wrong, my love?" Cantaloupe pleaded. Why so glum?"

"I love you more than anything in the world. I'm afraid of losing you," Mr. Wendal cried.

"You will never lose me, my love."

"There's something I need to tell you. It might be the end of us."

"Please, don't say that. You're scaring me. I want us to be together forever. I love you so much."

Week after week, for nine consecutive weeks, a dark and oppressive mood settled in after dinner, casting a shadow over their happiness.

One fateful night, after consuming forty-eight schnapps each, Mr. Wendal fell into a deep sleep. Biff, Bill, and Belinda, with hushed voices and cautious gestures, led Cantaloupe to the study, free of any candlesticks. They were determined to pave the way for Cantaloupe and Mr. Wendal's love to thrive, at least until the next game night, or perhaps even until the end of time.

Biff, Bill, and Belinda were on the verge of revealing a shocking revelation that would send shockwaves through Cantaloupe, leaving destruction in its path. The aftermath of this revelation threatened to shatter the bonds of love and forever alter the course of their lives.

Time.

I will continue tomorrow.

I can't help but wonder what exciting twists and turns await us in the story. I have a feeling it's going to be absolutely fantastic, maybe even Grade 3 amazing!

I won't know until I sit down to write. I'm giggling.

I think only a genius would be ↑↑ that self deprecating. Two up arrows = two lines above; for those of you scoring at home.

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