

# **For Three Transgressions and for Four**

**By Ben Marshall**

**In loving memory of Rebekah Marshall**

Though the overhanging black expanse of a new umbrella kept the pouring rain away from Amos Jefferson's head, it could not keep his face free of the saline moisture that had formed about his ebony eyes. As he stood silently, the gusting October wind began to whip the raindrops sidelong at the lower extremities of his pants. Tilting his umbrella to compensate, Amos noticed that the dribbles of rain on his mother's tombstone had formed a rivulet. Nearly an hour had passed at the grave site during this twelfth annual sojourn back to Little Rock, with Amos alternately weeping and talking aloud to his mother's memory. As he watched the swelling stream of water, his thoughts turned to the last time that he had seen her alive.

\* \* \* \* \*

"You remember that time when you imagined that Talitha and little Kumi had gone off to fight in Iraq?" Amos queried his mother, Bonita Jefferson, about her two young grandchildren, his own niece and nephew, who had been mere tots during the time of her confusion. He gently massaged her right hand from the side of her North Little Rock Memorial hospital bed. Despite the residual impact of her recent stroke, Bonita snorted a hearty laugh of assent.

“You were in and out of reality for a long while back then. Who’d have thunk that a *bladder infection* could cause serious dementia like that?” Amos asked rhetorically. “Doctor Blevins said it poisoned your bloodstream, but it took ‘em forever to figure that out.” He watched his mother nod her recollection of the aftermath, though he knew that she had very few memories from the actual period of her dementia. Amos was thrilled to see that her long-term memory was still intact, notwithstanding the other obvious effects of her recent stroke. He tested the waters a little further.

“It was about that same time that you started comin’ up with all that nonsense about your friends at the nursing home dyin’ suspiciously.” He watched her eyes for a glimmer of remembrance, but instead saw the twinkle of mirth disappear. “What? You don’t remember that?” Bonita’s eyes closed, though whether in response or simply in repose, Amos could not tell.

For the next half hour, Bonita drifted in and out of consciousness, finally awakening fully when one of the hospital’s kitchen assistants delivered her dinner. Amos carefully and delicately spoon-fed her as he had done for each of her meals over the past several days. Because the stroke had made swallowing difficult for her, the main source of her nutrients was a protein-filled gelatinous dessert. As he was feeding her the gelatin, the shift nurse flounced into the room.

“How y’all doin’ today?” she questioned cheerily.

“Pretty good, pretty good – Momma’s a tough ol’ bird,” Amos responded, “She even likes this loaded Jell-o.”

“That’s pretty potent stuff,” quipped the nurse, “One of the kitchen staff sneaked that stuff for about six months and put on about sixty pounds!”

At that, Bonita's eyes lit up and she began to cackle with gusto. Amos could feel the bed quivering against his left knee.

Throughout the remainder of the evening, Amos continued to hold Bonita's hand as they reminisced together, laughed together, prayed together, and even sang together. Amos was amazed at the clarity of Bonita's articulation as she sang old hymns with him, especially given the slurring of her speech in normal conversation. He briefly stopped singing and simply listened, lost in the recollection of Bonita clad in a purple satin choir robe with yellow neckerchief, joyfully belting out praises from the platform of his childhood church. He fought back the tide of emotion that threatened to sweep him out to a sea of forlorn expectations. He knew that Bonita needed his strength now more than ever, but he knew that his strength alone was not sufficient.

As the time drew near for Amos to return to the airport, he drew out his Bible from his briefcase. With his mind on Bonita's difficulty with swallowing, Amos turned to the sixth chapter of the book of Matthew and began to read from the 25<sup>th</sup> verse: "For this reason I say to you, do not be anxious for your life, as to what you shall eat, or what you shall drink; nor for your body, as to what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body than clothing? Look at the birds of the air, they do not sow, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not worth much more than they?" Amos felt a gentle squeeze from Bonita's hand, and observed a serene smile on her face.

"It's time for me to go, Momma," whispered Amos, his voice unable to find power. He managed a smile, and saw unrestrained love in her eyes as she beamed back at him. "I love you, Momma – I'll see you at Thanksgiving." He leaned his cheek against

her face, embracing her fondly before kissing her gently on the forehead. She squeezed his hand one more time and smiled from her eyes before he turned toward the door to leave.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Your attention, please – please direct your attention to the flight attendants at the front and midsections of the cabin as they direct you in our pre-flight safety instructions,” the automated voice droned over the intercom. Amos roused from his restless slumber, but his attention was not drawn to the obligatory spectacle of seat-belt demonstrations. His mind instead wandered back to the same Little Rock to Washington flight after the days spent with his mother in the hospital twelve years earlier. That time, his worries had been directed toward Bonita’s expected long road to recovery. Little had he realized that she would die suddenly and – to him, at least – unexpectedly, merely three days later, shortly after being transferred back to her Pine Bluff nursing home residence, just down the street from the apartment of his brother Hosea. Amos had been on the phone with his brother Joel, who lived in California, when the grim call from Hosea – Talitha’s and Kumi’s father – had interrupted on Joel’s cell phone, announcing Bonita’s demise. His airline tickets for a joyous return trip to Arkansas at Thanksgiving were converted into a heart-wrenching trip back for his mother’s funeral.

Amos was no longer the aspiring young businessman that he had been when his mother had passed on. His career as an actuary had blossomed over the last several years. Regrettably, he had not had the satisfaction of seeing his mother’s reaction when

he had obtained his fellowship in the Society of Actuaries. An achievement in itself, the designation carried even more significance for Amos, an African-American who had been raised by his widowed mother in impoverished circumstances. Now – the fall of 2022 – he was in charge of an entire division in the Office of the Chief Actuary (OCACT) at the Social Security Administration (SSA). Amos felt that he should be at the peak of career satisfaction. Instead, his work seemed to carry little genuine significance. Somewhat daunted by the fact that he was now older than his late father had ever been, and troubled by the sense that he had no legacy of his own – no wife, no children, no purpose – he sometimes wondered if he should have followed in his father’s footsteps as a Baptist minister. Thoughts of career alternatives meandered through his mind as Amos drifted back to sleep...

\* \* \* \* \*

“I still have a dream...” Amos heard the booming baritone voice of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. resonating from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., somewhere deep in his sleepy subconscious. Amos’ father, Walter Jefferson, had participated in the March on Washington as an angry young teenager. As an adult, Walter had become a man of gentle persuasion, teaching Amos that anger reflected a perception of injustice, serving to warn us that we needed to fix the perception or fix the injustice. He had often spoken to Amos of the impact that Dr. King had had on his thinking from that historic late August day in 1963 onward. Walter – like his icon – had died all too

young. Walter succumbed at age 41 to a massive heart attack, several years before Amos entered his own angry teen years.

The sweltering heat of Amos' dream was stifling, and he perspired profusely as he twisted in his reclined airplane seat. His subconscious rolled forward.

"I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal.'"

With that cue, Amos' subconscious rocketed backward in American history. He found himself standing beside Thomas Jefferson, from whom Amos' own surname had been derived. In Amos' dream, Jefferson was oblivious to Amos' presence, despite his close proximity. Amos was surprised at the American forefather's delicate, porcelain-like facial features, contrasting with the square-jawed hero who has been portrayed on the front side of each American 5-cent piece minted from the days of the Buffalo Nickel forward. Amos moved behind Jefferson and peered over the patriot's shoulder. He watched him scrawl with his quill pen through a line in the third paragraph on the parchment page: "We hold these truths to be *sacred and undeniable*: that all men are created equal..." was replaced with "We hold these truths to be *self-evident*: that all men are created equal..." As Jefferson's scribbling of changes continued, Amos watched a still sacred theme emerge: "...that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights; that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness..."

Amos' cranial motion picture careened further back in time. He found himself in ancient Israel, circa 750 B.C., in the city of Beth-El, listening to a bearded shepherd from Tekoa, a town further south in Judah. In his dream, Amos was inexplicably able to understand the Hebrew tongue spoken by the nomadic prophet who shared his first name:

“Thus says the LORD, ‘For three transgressions of Tyre and for four, I will not revoke its punishment, because they delivered up an entire population to Edom, and did not remember the covenant of brotherhood...’”

“Thus says the LORD, ‘For three transgressions of Edom and for four, I will not revoke its punishment, because he pursued his brother with the sword, while he stifled his compassion...’”

“Thus says the LORD, ‘For three transgressions of the sons of Ammon and for four, I will not revoke its punishment, because they ripped open the pregnant women of Gilead in order to enlarge their borders...’”

“Thus says the LORD, ‘For three transgressions of Israel and for four, I will not revoke its punishment, because they sell the righteous for money, and the needy for a pair of sandals...’”

“But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream...”

\* \* \* \* \*

At that moment, the plane lurched with turbulence. Amos, suddenly wide-eyed, found himself reaching for the airsick bag in the cloth flap behind the seat in front of him. He retched violently, not sure whether from the bumpy ride or the frightening scenes evoked by the prophet’s vivid incantations near the tail end of his dream.

Able to regain his composure, amble to the restroom, dispose of the bag, and get a drink of water prior to buckling back in for the plane’s landing, Amos weaved his way

through his mental checklist of things to do upon arrival. His emotional and physical exhaustion argued for grabbing his bags and heading home to bed, but other allegiances warred for his attention.

Despite finding that his annual visits to Bonita's grave increasingly left him disconsolate about the meaning in his career and his life, Amos still took his job seriously. Though the hour was now late, he decided to drop in at his office at OCACT, which had been re-located to Washington from Baltimore several years earlier.

"Hey there, Amos – you're back!" The genuine fondness that Sam, the night security guard, held for Amos was evident in his broad, neon grin. Amos returned the greeting as he approached the security desk and, after swiping his security card on the electronic reader, decided to invigorate his lethargic bones by climbing the stairs to his fourth floor office.

As he rounded a corner to the third floor landing, Amos was stunned to see the sprawling figure of Hugh MacKnight lying in a crumpled heap at the foot of the next set of concrete stairs. Amos clutched Hugh by his shoulders and shook him gently, trying to stir him to consciousness. Hugh's eyes opened, but could not seem to focus.

"Hugh, buddy – it's me, Amos! What happened to you?"

"Compression... of... the... distribution..." muttered Hugh slowly, his thick Scottish brogue nowhere to be found.

"Hugh – what're you talkin' about?" Amos pleaded. His eyes fixed on a cherry red, almost black, oozing wound near the crown of Hugh's burnished head. "Did you fall down the stairs?" Amos shuddered at the sheer stupidity of his question. There was no reply. Hugh's eyes closed once again.

“Hugh, listen to me – we’ve gotta get you to a doctor. Lie still and let me call 911.” Amos nearly swore as he fumbled the cell phone that he was extricating from his shirt pocket. After picking it up, Amos saw that there was no signal – a common frustration caused by the thickness of the building’s walls, but now looming as far more serious than the typical transient inconvenience.

“Crap,” muttered Amos. “Hugh, I’m going to get help. Stay there ‘til I get back.”

Amos bounded down the stairs to find Sam and quickly explained the situation. While Sam issued the emergency call and waited to show the paramedics where they were needed, Amos raced back up the stairs to assist Hugh. He sat on the floor beside Hugh and cradled his friend’s head on his inner elbow.

“Hang in there, buddy – help’s on the way,” Amos offered, feeling helpless and unnerved.

Hugh’s eyelids fluttered once more. “Help... them...” he whispered. Hugh’s neck went limp.

“Hugh, buddy – wake up!” Amos shouted desperately. He tried to administer CPR to Hugh, but it was to no avail. By the time the paramedics arrived, it was clear to Amos that his friend was dead. The official proclamation was made at the hospital a short time later.

\* \* \* \* \*

Hugh had by no means been one of Amos’ closest friends, but the two had worked together on several projects at OCACT and shared a certain sense of comfortable

camaraderie. Hugh was a fellow actuary, though his credentials had been earned through a different professional body, the Faculty of Actuaries in Scotland, prior to his arrival in Washington. Amos had always enjoyed Hugh's sarcastic wit, as well as his heavy Edinburgh accent. Hugh had been responsible for performing numerous mortality studies over his years at OCACT. Amos found it disturbing that Hugh would so soon become one of those statistics.

In the weeks following Hugh's funeral, Amos found himself increasingly puzzled by the final phrases spoken by his late friend. "Compression... of... the... distribution..." ... "Help... them..." Amos also found himself haunted by recurrences of his dream about Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Thomas Jefferson, and the prophet Amos.

On a blustery Tuesday in late December, two days after a brown but frigid Christmas, Amos received an innocuous mass-distribution email notice from the Society of Actuaries. It solicited his nomination for the 2023 Robert J. Myers Service Award. While the rest of the world was enjoying a long holiday break with their families, Amos sat motionless behind his office desk, pondering the email's content. He reflected on whether the award had ever been made posthumously, and wondered whether Hugh would somehow qualify. "The award recognizes actuaries for a single noteworthy public service achievement and actuaries who have devoted their careers to public service," he read aloud. He knew from past history that there was a tendency to grant the award for lifetime service, but Hugh had been too young to qualify on that criterion. He probed his recollection of Hugh's body of work, but could not fathom a single crowning achievement on which he would otherwise qualify for the award.

Amos was roused from his musings by a rapid burst of knocks as his office doorknob turned. A silver-haired, bespectacled gentleman peered from behind the frosted glass of the door. Amos recognized the man as Henry Petersen, a paradoxical being if there ever was one, for he was both an actuary and a politician. Petersen's reputation had reached near-mythical proportions; he was known to be not only keenly intelligent, but also cunning and articulate.

"Jefferson, I need you to look into something for me," Petersen stated flatly. He appeared blatantly unaware of the lack of any direct reporting relationship or accountability channel between the two. Amos leaned forward, eager to hear Petersen's request, despite his inner resentment that Petersen's tone seemed to demand rather than to ask.

"I've been trying to justify to Congress why our 2022 OASDI Trustees Report still shows an under-funding problem," Petersen continued. "I don't think the assumptions have been updated sufficiently to reflect emerging experience. MacKnight was working on some new assumptions, but his untimely tumble has left me without the recommendation I need. You've got to make somebody available to assist me."

"Well, Congressman, we're all strapped for resources. Hugh didn't work in my division. Why do you want somebody from *my* staff?"

"Damn it, Jefferson, you're like so many of our fellow actuaries – always identifying the problems rather than looking for solutions!"

"Look here, Congressman, I resent that remark," retorted Amos. "You, more than anybody, should know that when you're allocatin' scarce resources, you have to develop

priorities. I'm just tryin' to figure out whether this belongs in the queue, and, if so, where it stacks up."

"Fine – sorry, Jefferson," apologized Petersen, "but this is really important. It will affect next spring's Congressional budget in a significant way. Even minor changes to the assumptions could keep us from having to raise payroll taxes or cut Social Security benefits once again."

"I see," conceded Amos, "but I still don't know why you're comin' to me. Hugh's old department should already have a runnin' start on it."

"To be honest, I wasn't satisfied with their work thus far. 'Paralysis by analysis,' you know. I need this done, and I need it done yesterday. I already know what the assumptions should be – I've seen the experience data. I just need somebody with authority to look over the proposed assumption changes and bless them."

Amos felt an involuntary shiver run up the length of his spine. Results-oriented judgments – he'd heard about them from his lawyer friends, but he hadn't often heard them suggested by his actuarial peers, at least not in the public sector. "Tell you what, Congressman," he said, "I'll take a quick look at their files and see what I can do. But I want you to understand that I'm makin' no promises at this point."

"Thanks, Jefferson, that's all I can ask," replied Congressman Petersen. He withdrew from the room in as sudden a fashion as he had entered.

\* \* \* \* \*

The early days of 2023 brought a pristine blanket of bright dust-like snow to the nation's capital. Amos pushed the fringed ends of his woolen scarf inside the neck of his heavy black trench coat. His frosty breath hovered in a mist about his face as he trudged westward along the Mall grounds. He always found a walk around the monuments to be productive at those times when he needed to engage in some heavy mental weight-lifting.

"Results-based assumptions," he thought. "That's what it sounded like when Petersen barged into my office. But that's not what the numbers bear out." He kicked a frozen wedge of snowy ice off the salted asphalt. "Hugh's mortality experience studies *really do* show that the cost of Social Security benefits is flattening out – maybe even *declining*. But what was taking Hugh so long to recommend that the assumptions be updated to reflect that reality?"

Amos picked up the pace of his stroll. He raised his gloved right hand to shield his face from the gusting northerly wind. His eyes were transfixed on the Lincoln Memorial, which lay several hundred yards ahead. His inner conversation continued: "The cohort life expectancies at birth – using updated actual experience from our massive database – keep on climbing, just like they've been projected to do for years. But the cohort life expectancies at age 65 – again using updated actual experience – have stopped climbing, and even dropped a little in recent years. Couldn't Hugh see there's no mathematical doubt that payroll tax increases and benefit reductions are no longer needed?"

Amos strode more briskly toward the monument that he had set in his sights. As he finished climbing the myriad of steps, he felt the protection of the Memorial's

northern wall from the gusting wind. He walked almost reverently to the feet of the giant statue.

“Ol’ Abe,” he whispered aloud. “Even as good a man as you took almost two whole years to work up the nerve to do what was right. You could’ve signed the Emancipation Proclamation right after the war started, without tryin’ to build up a consensus.”

Amos froze in his tracks, as much a statue as the giant form in front him. “Do what was right,” his thoughts repeated. A shadowy picture began to emerge from the mental haze that enveloped him. “Life expectancies at birth: rising; life expectancies at age 65: declining.” Amos’ epiphany wrestled to free itself from the recesses of his mind. “That means the distribution of deaths is being pushed later at the younger end, and pushed earlier at the older end – *compression of the distribution!*”

The throttle on Amos’ brain was now at full tilt. “What would explain such a phenomenon?” he questioned audibly. “Better medical technology, healthier lifestyles, and the final arrival of universal health care availability in 2011 – all those factors help to explain the mortality improvements at the front end of the distribution. But what could explain the deterioration at the back end? AIDS, increasing engagement in extreme sports, and sedentary lifestyles don’t describe what we’ve witnessed in the older generation in recent years.”

A montage from Amos’ recurring dream passed through his consciousness, stirring multiple senses. From the steps just outside the monument where he now stood, he could hear Dr. King declare from the past, “I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: ‘We hold these truths to be self-

evident: that all men are created equal.” He could see Thomas Jefferson fine-tuning his Declaration of Independence to include the additional truth “...that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights; that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness...” He could smell the sheep dung on the feet of the prophet Amos as he called down divine retribution on the nations that committed atrocities against the weak and defenseless: “For three transgressions... and for four...”

“Dear Lord,” he prayed aloud, “I know you’re showin’ me somethin’. Your word tells me to trust in You with all my heart, and lean not on my own understandin’; and in all my ways acknowledge You, and You will direct my paths. I’m leanin’ on you for understandin’, Lord.” A glimpse of his mother’s troubled face, suddenly devoid of the mirth that had been so evident as she lay in her hospital bed, imprinted itself in Amos’ mind. His words that had elicited her response returned to him from some dozen years distant: “It was about that same time that you started comin’ up with all that nonsense about your friends at the nursing home dyin’ suspiciously.”

“Oh... *my... God!*” Amos bellowed, seemingly from his bowels, as he realized the enormity of his revelation. His breathing became labored and his pulse raced. His roiling stomach threatened to leave his not-yet-digested breakfast at Lincoln’s feet. “The government... couldn’t make the Social Security system work on benefit reductions, revenue increases, and alternative forms of investment...” He remembered with disdain playing an on-line “Social Security Game” that had been sponsored by the American Academy of Actuaries, posing these three alternatives for dealing with the Social Security under-funding problem, in his early days at OCACT. The aging of the Baby Boom generation, the pay-as-you go structure of the system, the shortfall in the SSA trust

fund, the Congressional reluctance to increase payroll taxes – they had all been solved with an ingenious yet dastardly response: *the covert and systematic elimination of infirm elderly Social Security recipients.*

Amos knew from his early indoctrination as an actuary that “the work of science is to substitute facts for appearances and demonstrations for impressions.” He was reluctant to jump to conclusions. He resisted the notion that his own government, or some renegade faction thereof, could sponsor such an atrocity. But in his heart of hearts, he knew that it was true.

Envisioning his father Walter entering the mental montage with his mother Bonita, the prophet Amos, Thomas Jefferson, Dr. King, and Ol’ Abe, Amos recalled the opening words of one of the later chapters in the New Testament book of Hebrews: “Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us... let us run with endurance the race that is set before us...” As he pondered those words, he could hear his Scottish friend’s dying words echoing from within the memorial walls: “*Help... them...*”

\* \* \* \* \*

“*Proof.* Irrefutable evidence – that’s what I need,” Amos murmured angrily to himself. Two weeks of searching Social Security databases and Library of Congress records had yielded little more than subtle hints and statistical subterfuge. A sparse few Internet articles blared accusations against governments sanctioning the elimination of the elderly, but their impact vanished amid the multitude of quack-variety conspiracy theories that accompanied them. None provided a shred of credible evidence.

Amos felt his anger rising from a simmer to a seethe as he reflected on his frustrating quest. “Anger’s always a red flag,” he could hear Walter’s homily to his impressionable young son, “it tells you somethin’ needs fixin’ – fix your perception, or fix the injustice.” If Amos was right about what was going on, there was a serious injustice to fix. If he was wrong, his perceptions seemed to indicate that he’d developed paranoia in his advancing middle age.

The fact that he felt he could trust no other person to help on his quest made him wonder seriously whether he was indeed paranoid. “This is big – *really* big! It would take a massive effort, no matter how covert. There’s no tellin’ who’d have to be involved. I just *can’t* take any chances,” he thought despondently.

Amos adjusted the fluorescent lamp that rested on his cherry veneer office desk. He needed some illumination, but perhaps illumination of a different variety. He returned his attention to the computer screen that seemed to stare blankly back at him. He began a visual scan of the numerous directories that he had pored over dozens of times before.

Amos had previously been given security access to Hugh’s directories in order to address Congressman Petersen’s request, and had come away with no progress on his alternate agenda. “Come on, Hugh, ol’ buddy – where’d you hide it?” Amos paused and chuckled to himself, “Talkin’ to yourself again, Amos. No doubt paranoia is the least of your worries.” His shoulders shuddered with the first real belly laugh he’d had in weeks, maybe months.

“Maybe I’m goin’ about this all wrong,” he hypothesized, staring at the subdirectory list in Hugh’s “My Documents” folder. His attention rested on the one labeled “Program Files.” “That’s odd,” thought Amos, “program files should be on his

own computer, not on his network directory.” He began to explore the Program Files subdirectory.

“Nothing looks odd,” he thought as his eye passed up and down the list, “still, there’s gotta be a reason for him having a Program Files directory on here.” A sudden burst of mental illumination shone as his vision focused on a further subdirectory marked as “Compressed”. Knowing that such a subdirectory typically is used for storing files in a format that allows more efficient utilization of drive space, Amos nonetheless alighted on the final thought in Hugh’s mind: the distribution of deaths by age was *compressed*.

“You wily ol’ devil, Hugh,” chortled Amos, “what a great place to hide your research.” He clicked his mouse on the subdirectory and was immediately prompted for a password. “What would you have used?” he asked aloud. “Something meaningful to you...” Amos reflected on Hugh’s heritage and humor. He began to type: H-A-G-G-I-S. “I’ll only get three chances before the network locks it down,” thought Amos, “gotta make ‘em count.” He declined to hit the “Enter” key, foregoing a password attempt based on the Scottish sheep-liver delicacy. “Gotta have at least six letters; knowing you and your minimalist tendencies, it’ll *only* have six, and it’ll be easy to remember,” Amos quipped. His fingers tapped once more: T-A-R-T-A-N, he began to offer. He again hesitated over the “Enter” key. A second burst of illumination flashed across his psyche. “Hugh, you were a triple whammy nerd – not only an actuary and a computer hacker, but also a *Trekkie*!” He smiled as he typed the name of Hugh’s understandably favorite Star Trek character of all time: S-C-O-T-T-Y-[Enter]...

Amos was startled as the error message “Password Invalid” blinked across the monitor. “I could have sworn...” he sighed. A final burst of illumination seized Amos.

“I’m right, but I’m wrong,” he said aloud. “Hugh would have been a little more careful than that.” His fingers clacked on the keyboard once more: D-O-O-H-A-N-[Enter]. The “Compressed” sub-directory flashed its contents across the screen, in beautiful recognition of the Irish-Canadian actor who had portrayed the crusty Scottish chief engineer who enabled so many adventures aboard the U.S.S. Enterprise...

\* \* \* \* \*

*Petersen.* He was in the thick of it. Having spent half a career inside Social Security financing, half a career inside Congress, posturing all the while to become a power broker, who better was there to engineer a plan like this? Hugh’s skills as a hacker had served him well. His files were filled with highly confidential material, stocked with damning evidence, not only against Petersen, but against high profile figures at a plethora of government agencies. From the chronology found within the Scotsman’s records, it appeared that the seeds of the SSA conspiracy had been planted a few decades earlier. Germinating from a simple government policy position to essentially require “Do Not Resuscitate” (DNR) orders to be signed by or on behalf of seniors who were receiving public funding for nursing home entry, the “cost reduction” plan had taken root with a clandestine scholarship program for medical and nursing students who were willing to join the effort to promote the “greater good” via “helpful” interpretation of such DNR orders. The strategy blossomed as the front end of the Baby Boom generation neared septegenarian status, allowing more widespread recruitment within the higher ranks of government, to help combat the scourge of Social Security benefit costs that threatened to

spin out of control. The DNR interpretations made their way outside the drab olive walls of nursing home wards and into the sterile white confines of hospital rooms of often vivacious seniors. A truly utilitarian society had developed while the masses slept.

“But surely Hugh’s research can’t be exhaustive,” breathed Amos, “Who and how many conspirators are there? And who’s simply as blissfully ignorant as I’ve been? More importantly, *where can I turn for help?*” Amos was warmed by the recollection of the beginning and end of Psalm 121: “I will lift up my eyes to the mountains; from where shall my help come? My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth... The LORD will protect you from all evil; He will keep your soul.”

Amos was chilled by the grim realization that Hugh’s “untimely tumble” was in all likelihood not an accident. “Don’t want to become another statistic,” realized Amos, “at least not just yet. I’ve gotta have a plan.” Amos could barely suppress the thought that if ever someone within his circle of acquaintances had exhibited signs of paranoia, it was Amos Jefferson at this very moment. Nonetheless, after less than fifteen minutes of cogitation, he sprung into action in response to these thought processes.

“Congressman Petersen,” Amos chirped to the voice on the other end of the telephone line, “Sir, I haven’t had much time to spend in the details...” He felt a momentary twinge of guilt at his involuntary prevarication, prompted by his instinct for self-preservation. “Nonetheless, from a high-level review of the model results, I’d say it’s a no-brainer to pull in the reins on Social Security payroll tax increases or benefit cuts.”

“Excellent,” responded Petersen, “good work, Jefferson! Can I count on you to accompany me to the end-of-March hearings before Congress? Your testimony may well be needed to get the message through the thick skulls of these bureaucrats.” His derision

for his Congressional peers wafted across the wires. “Jefferson, you cut a very credible figure – you’ve got to learn to use it to your advantage.”

“Thanks, Congressman. I’ll get my act together; just send the dates and times, and I’ll plug them into my calendar.”

“Will do – we’ll have lunch a day or two beforehand so that I can finish briefing you.” The click at the other end indicated to Amos that he had been dismissed.

\* \* \* \* \*

The coverlet of cherry blossoms trumpeted the arrival of spring in the District of Columbia. Unable to observe the beauties of nature while secured inside the Capitol building, Amos contemplated his impending presentation to Congress. He pulled nervously at his white collar, loosening the constriction of the conservative business tie that adorned his ebony neck. “No need to be nervous,” he assured himself, “it’s not like anyone could manage to bring any sort of weapon in here.”

Congressman Petersen approached and winked at Amos as he took his seat beside him. “It’s okay, Jefferson. Take a deep breath. You look like the whole world is resting upon your shoulders.” “Somethin’ like that,” replied Amos. His inner voice clarified, “Little do you know, Congressman.”

Amos gazed at the crowd seated around him. He searched for those wearing press passes or carrying cameras, making sure that the opportunity for his message to be disseminated as widely as possible would be available. Always risk averse, Amos had taken the precaution of setting up timed emails to be transmitted during his presentation

to all the major news agencies around the country. The emails carried attachments from Hugh's files to provide the detailed evidence backing Amos' claims, to a greater extent than he would likely be permitted in the Congressional forum.

A short while later, the time had come for Amos to testify. The cameras were rolling. He was sworn to tell the truth as he took his place behind the seated podium. He silently prayed for fortitude and fluent delivery. "You cut a very credible figure," echoed Petersen's earlier admonition across the canyon that seemed to be forming between Amos' ears. The Congressman's reassurance spawned serenity in Amos' soul and narrowed the gap between his ears. He checked his notes, paused for a moment to make eye contact with the listeners and then the cameras, and commenced his prepared yet passionate speech:

"Congressmen... Congresswomen... my fellow Americans... I have been called upon to testify before you today on a matter of very grave concern. The under-funding of the Social Security program has been on the agenda of American society for generations. During those decades, many solutions have been proposed; fewer have been tried; and all except one have – due to demographics – experienced varying degrees of failure."

"I have been asked to bring you tidings of great joy: news that the spiraling costs of this program have been brought under control; news that the assumptions underlying the cost projections do not reflect reality, but are grossly exaggerated when compared to actual historical experience. And I am prepared to bring you that news."

"But I am today answering a higher calling. I am today wearing the mantle of the prophet Amos, in calling down judgment upon this nation. I am clothed in the garb of our forefather, Thomas Jefferson, in declaring the unalienable right of *every* person to life,

liberty and the pursuit of happiness. I am walking in the path trod by Abraham Lincoln, in proclaiming the emancipation of a class of people who have endured captivity and suffered unspeakable violence at the hands of their captors. I am standing on the pinnacle of the mountain seen by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in crying out, ‘Let freedom ring!’”

“But I am no hero; neither am I a raving lunatic. I am simply a grateful son, who was raised to do what was right. I am simply a believer in the Father of the widow and the orphan, who calls us to do justice with compassion.”

“To you I am bearing witness today of an atrocity that we – myself included, had I not seen the evidence – would smugly dismiss as being beyond impossible; an artifact of American antiquity, pre-empted by the lessons learned in the abolishment of slavery and the vanquishing of Hitler’s concentration camps. But we have not learned the lessons of history.”

“At this very hour, the evidence supporting the truth that I now declare to you is being reviewed at news agencies across this land, from sea to shining sea. That evidence leads to this inevitable conclusion: that the elderly among us are falling prey to the avarice of certain factions within our government; that state-sponsored genocide is not a relic of the past, but a current reality. The statistics that announce the tidings of Social Security cost reductions also declare the price truly paid for those savings. I bring you a mathematical message cloaked not simply in correlation but in causation. My fellow Americans, *our government has waged war on the elderly, systematically exterminating those unfortunate enough to find themselves resident in nursing homes or in need of hospitalization.*”

Amos paused for effect, and then continued: “That unrelenting assault is a function not only of government avarice, but of *your* avarice and *mine*. Please hear me out: let me explain in very clear terms. Politicians possess one primary approach: to please, or at least appear to please, the people. Long ago, certain politicians recognized the ‘no-win’ situation of Social Security. Every solution was unpalatable: raise taxes; cut benefit amounts; defer eligibility ages; the list goes on and on. But at the root of that unpalatability was an *implicit and unchallenged assumption*; that the American dream *requires a standard of living unmatched by any other nation in the world.*”

“That dream has loosed the anchor of our morality. That dream has caused us to set sail on a covetous crusade. We and our children now bow down at the idolatrous altar of the almighty dollar. In order to please the people – particularly those able to venture out to vote – the politicians determined a way to feed our greed; a way to keep taxes on working adults down, and to keep benefits to voting retirees up – regardless of need. They did it not only for themselves. They did it for you – and for me.”

“I am today calling for another American revolution. I am calling us to give up *that* American dream – that *nightmare* of the infirm elderly – and replace it with a dream that accords with that of Dr. King. I am calling us to relinquish our requirement for riches; a requirement which is in no way an inalienable right.”

“I invite each of you hearing me – ‘for him who has ears to hear, let him hear’ – to converge on Washington in peaceful demonstration, in support of these elderly victims. I invite you to stand in solidarity on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and across the Washington Mall and the entire city, as was done some three score years ago – as a statement of a new dream, of an equality that eschews rather than embraces avarice.

*Now* is the time. It is time to take back our country. It is time to take back our families. It is time to take back our *souls*...”

\* \* \* \* \*

THE END