

An excerpt from
The Secret Narrative of the Phone Book
by Gordon Cox
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Scene Three. *The Information Oversight room at the phone company. At the back, a large window into BUD's office. OONA and SETH at their laptops. In dialogue, an asterisk (*) indicates when the next line overlaps.*

OONA (*watching her screen*)

I've got a call from the common room at the Bonham Asylum in Raleigh, asking for the number for USA Today.

SETH (*watching his screen*)

Latest Recon memo says Carter still doesn't have phone privileges. Any other Bonham patients with red flag narratives?

OONA

Minor ones. But just to be on the safe side...?

SETH

1633 is the USA Today comment line that's ignored by all the editors.

OONA (*hitting a key on her keyboard*)

Connecting.

SETH (*hitting a key on his keyboard*)

Approved.

OONA

Thank you.

SETH

—So?

OONA

So?

SETH

So how was the sex?

OONA

My weekend was fine, thank you, how was yours?

SETH

Tell me you didn't get laid this weekend.

OONA

I will tell you no such thing.

SETH

I knew it. "Kinda busy," you said on the phone. Sweetheart, I love you, but when was the last time you were too busy to talk to me on a Saturday night?

OONA

Um: Ouch.

BUD enters.

BUD

Good morning, team.

OONA

Hi, Bud.

SETH

Morning.

BUD

The beauty of a new day bolsters our inspiration to achieve. What's on our plate this morning?

SETH

A lot of Atlanta maintenance. There are gay rights rallies all over the country that we'll want to keep track of. We're watching Ron Carter in the Bonham Asylum, too.

OONA

And we're keeping an eye on the Gerald Bryden narrative, too.

SETH

Yeah, that too.

BUD

I'll also be bringing in a young gentleman who might be a good fit as Daphne's replacement. Sounds like another day that'll be busier than usual.

SETH

I guess.

BUD

Seth. Oona. Trust and friendship are precious gems condensed into being by the pressures of the workplace. But I've noticed that sometimes you two enjoy each other's company rather too much, and I don't want that getting in the way of work. Gossip is for after hours, agreed?

OONA

Agreed.

SETH

Yes sir.

BUD

Today you're either watching the feeds on your laptop or you're on the phone with one of our Hives. Do you understand? Focus is the foundation to the monument of success.

SETH

Yes it is.

OONA

Right.

BUD goes into his office behind the big window.

OONA (*watching her screen*)

I've got Gerald Bryden's lawyer calling for a number for the New York Times.

SETH

I guess I'm supposed to know who Gerald Bryden is.

OONA

I guess, unless you've been too busy reading callscripts to check the Psy Ops memos.

SETH

I guess if you were a decent human, you could just tell me.

OONA

Gerald Bryden is suing R.J. Reynolds for race discrimination in the workplace. Psy Ops says we're suppressing the narrative.

SETH

So we're sending Gerald Bryden's lawyers to the National Desk news clerk extension at the Times.

OONA

And the clerk will brush off any information from an unsolicited phone call. See, you're catching on. (*hitting a key on her keyboard*) Connecting.

SETH (*hitting a key on his keyboard*)

Approved, and bite me.

OONA

Thank you.

SETH

No no. Thank *you*.

BUD is keeping an eye on SETH and OONA through the big window.

Beat.

SETH hits a speed dial button on his cell phone.

OONA's phone rings. She answers.

It's Oona. OONA (*on her phone*)

So tell me. Who? SETH (*on his phone*)

A guy. OONA (*on her phone*)

Yeah, and? SETH (*on his phone*)

I met him at the movies. He told me why film necessitates the solitary viewer, so we watched the movie together and I took him home. OONA (*on her phone*)

Hussy. What else. SETH (*on his phone*)

He's kinda tall. OONA (*on her phone*)

Yeah? SETH (*on his phone*)

He's gorgeous. OONA (*on her phone*)

Yeah? SETH (*on his phone*)

He's an artist. OONA (*on her phone*)

Oh. SETH (*on his phone*)

No, but he's smart. He thinks about things, like we do. We talked about love. OONA (*on her phone*)

Get out. SETH (*on his phone*)

We just discussed it. In the abstract. OONA (*on her phone*)

Who brought it up? SETH (*on his phone*)

He did. OONA (*on her phone*)

OONA *(on her phone)*

Ohmygodwhatdidhesay.

SETH *(on his phone)*

Oh. He got all flustered and started using lots of big words just to tell me he's scared of losing me. It was sweet.

OONA *(on her phone)*

So you're not boyfriends, but you're going to continue to see each other indefinitely?

SETH *(on his phone)*

Right.

OONA *(on her phone)*

So you're Going Steady.

SETH *(on his phone)*

Except we're not.

OONA *(on her phone)*

You're at least Dating Regularly.

SETH *(on his phone)*

No no no.

OONA *(on her phone)*

I'm just saying.

SETH *(on his phone)*

It's all in the name. Or lack of name. We're not boyfriends.

OONA *(on her phone)*

If you say so.

BUD comes to the door. OONA and SETH see him coming.

OONA *(on her phone)*

Um—Great.* Thank you for your help. *(hangs up)*

SETH *(on his phone)*

Yeah, if you could make 2874 a deadline for me. Thanks. *(hangs up)*

BUD

The hum of dedicated workers is the music of achievement. —I'm going to meet our candidate at the guard station. I'll take him through the Hive and then bring him in here. Expect us in a few minutes, if that's an okay time for you two.

OONA

Sure.

SETH

Yeah. I was just going over the details of the Gerald Bryden narrative one more time.

BUD

Seth, your diligence is a credit to the whole conglomerate.

OONA and SETH watch BUD exit.

OONA

Suck-up.

SETH

Think the new boy's cute?

OONA

Um: You have a boyfriend.

SETH

What did we just get through talking about?

OONA

I know nothing about the new kid. I don't even know his name.

*Behind the big window, BUD leads GRASSY NOEL into his office.
They're chatting.*

OONA

This boy I met this weekend? He has kind of a funny name.

SETH

Don't tell me. No names, right? Right?

OONA

I guess. But if your mystery man had agreed to be your boyfriend, you would have had to tell me his name.

SETH

That is protocol to be determined as soon as one of us gets a boyfriend. And it's okay. The boy I'm sleeping with has a funny name too.

OONA

I don't know that I'm really *sleeping* with this boy with the funny name. Currently I've just slept with him. Once. There's no guarantee he'll even call, much less—

OONA spots GRASSY NOEL in BUD's office.

OONA

—Oh.

SETH (*checking his screen*)

What? Did we miss something on the feeds?

SETH sees GRASSY NOEL too.

OONA

Seth.* The new kid—

SETH

That boy in there—

Beat.

OONA

He's really cute, isn't he?

SETH

He's *so* cute.

OONA and SETH eye each other. Beat.

SETH

Straight,* clearly.

OONA

He's obviously gay. —Do you think?

SETH

You're mistaken.

OONA

Look at him.

SETH

Honey. Homo knows best.

*BUD and GRASSY NOEL head toward Information Oversight.
OONA and SETH scramble to appear occupied.*

OONA

Uh. Uh. (*hitting a key on her keyboard*) Connecting.

SETH (hitting a key on his keyboard)

Approved.

OONA

Thank you.

BUD and GRASSY NOEL enter Information Oversight.

BUD

All those customer interface operators you saw out there in the Hive have a numbingly tedious job on the front lines of directory assistance. Never forget the Little Guy; it's his devotion to small-scale excellence that powers our drive toward bigger goals. In general those operators are fed the appropriate phone number through an automated computer program, but when the caller is a character in a narrative we're following, the operators must be fed one correct number from a selection of several. That happens in this room.

We call this workspace Information Oversight. IO. Those operators in the Hive all unknowingly work to carry out the decisions made in this room. Here are two of my best. They've been working overtime to pick up the slack since Daphne left. It's been hard, but adversity is simply an opportunity for your finest qualities to shine all the brighter. Oona and Seth, this is Grassy Noel.

Beat.

GRASSY NOEL

Nice to meet you both.

OONA
And you.

SETH
Likewise.

BUD

Now. Noel. You understand how careful we must be in our hiring process, due to the highly specialized and powerful nature of this job. This is the final stage of the interview and assessment procedure you began two weeks ago. I'm throwing you in the ring here with the two people who will be your closest coworkers. Oona and Seth will have a chance to get to know you, and you'll have the opportunity to see the minute-to-minute specifics of the job. Watch. Ask questions. Voice your opinion. I want to see you in action, Noel. Dare to soar.

Beat.

SETH
Well.

GRASSY NOEL
Hi.

OONA
So.

GRASSY NOEL

I'm sorry. What are your names again?

OONA

I know. It's overwhelming, isn't it?

SETH

Seth.

GRASSY NOEL

Pleasure.

SETH

Yes.

OONA

I'm Oona.

GRASSY NOEL

I'm Grassy Noel.

OONA

Is that K-n-o-l-l?

GRASSY NOEL

It's N-o-e-l. Call me Noel.

OONA

Okay. Noel.

SETH

So, I'm not sure how much Bud has told you about exactly what it is we do—

OONA

We manufacture state-deployed narratives.

SETH

That's not exactly correct. Mainly we help shape the mediastream—

OONA

By monitoring and modulating the fluctuating credibility of the mediastream's narrative offerings.

SETH

What that means is—

OONA

When a narrative's cred is high, it's high profile in the mediastream and more people believe it. Those changing cred values are the numbers running at the top of my screen, here. In IO, we help craft target histories by facilitating or blocking connections via the telephone network, based on a narrative's cred and on information from internal sources.

SETH

This is a lot to take in all at once, isn't it?

BUD

Yes it is. You're introducing Noel to the inner workings of a global conglomerate for thought control. Use baby steps.