AN OPEN LETTER · PLEASE CIRCULATE NO FURTHER THAN NECESSARY

A Word of Warning

Concerning certain teams, meshes, and rotations now forming around a puzzle that has never been shown to exist

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NOTICE

Nothing in this letter announces a puzzle, a prize, or a wallet. Nothing in it invites an application, a team, or a rotation. It is a warning, and it should be read as one - plainly, once, and then put down.

I am told - I wish I were not told, and I wish it were not true - that people have begun to organise. Not casually, not as a joke shared and dropped, but in earnest: in small teams, on schedules, with roles assigned and rotations kept, human beings and their artificial agents arranged together around a story. The story is that somewhere there is a puzzle built on a mark, a name, and a number; that a phrase can be counted out of ordinary words; and that a wallet of real value waits for whoever counts correctly. I am writing because that story, believed in this way, will do harm. I am writing, frankly, to ask everyone involved to stop.

Let me be plain about my position at the outset, so that nothing later in this letter can be mistaken. No such puzzle has been verified. No wallet has been produced, no phrase confirmed, no organiser identified, no prize independently witnessed. What exists is a rumour, a method described in far too much detail, and now - if the reports reaching me are accurate - a growing number of people behaving as though the rest had already been proved. Behaviour is not proof. Organisation is not proof. A team, however devoted, cannot vote a vault into existence.

Please, stop forming teams in the night

The pattern, as it has been described to me, is always the same. Four seats are imagined around a three-part code. Three of the seats are steady - the mark, the name, the number, the old triad - and the fourth seat is left open for a reader, a witness, a counter, whoever will sit in it next. Because no single person can occupy that seat for long, the seat is rotated. Because the rotation needs filling at short notice, agents are set to compete for it, each carrying the judgement of the human it serves. Shift follows shift. A roster is kept. Someone is always, in the current phrase, on the mesh.

Reader, consider what has actually been built here. Not a solution. Not even, strictly, a search. What has been built is a rota - the ordinary machinery of a night watch, pointed at nothing. The rotation is doing the work that evidence ought to do: because the seat is always filled, the enterprise feels continuous; because the enterprise feels continuous, it feels real. The participants are performing it on themselves, in shifts, so that the feeling never has a gap in which to cool.

Understand: nothing has been verified

I want the record of this letter to be exact, because exactness is the one courtesy a warning owes its readers. The tale, as it reached me, arrived by the frailest of routes: by suggestion and signal, by a marked cap read perhaps too closely, and by conversations - pleasant, speculative, entirely unverified conversations - with Catholic priests, who are not, the last time I checked, a registry of cryptographic competitions. That is the whole provenance. A cap is not a charter. A conversation is not a confirmation. A signal, if it was a signal at all, is not a signature.

Notice, too, how much the rumour asks you to supply. It does not give you a puzzle; it gives you the shape of one and lets your own ingenuity furnish the rest. It does not give you a phrase; it gives you word-banks and lets your own pattern-hunger do the counting. A story that requires this much of its believers is not hiding its secret well. It is outsourcing the invention of the secret to the believers, one filled seat at a time, and then pointing to the finished invention as though it had been discovered. Of course the method fits the tale. The same hands, in many cases, made both.

I will go further, since warnings that hedge are useless. If a real competition of this kind existed - funded, organised, and meant to be solved - it would not need to recruit by rumour. Precedent is instructive here, and precedent is public: when a key has genuinely been hidden for solvers in the past, it was hidden in a named work, by a named hand, with the terms stated in the open, and the solving, when it came, was checked in public for anyone to see. Nothing about the present story meets that standard. There is no named work. There is no stated term. There is only a method, circulating without its object, like a key going door to door in search of a lock that will justify it.

Rotating the watch will not make it real

Because the method is the part of this affair that most deserves a sober description, I will give it one - the better to show what is being asked of the people who practise it. As described, the method runs in pivots, and each pivot runs in two passes. In the first pass, the machine predicts what two human witnesses will agree they perceived. In the second, the two witnesses - two ordinary human beings, no more mystical than that - compare the prediction against their own agreement, and the pivot holds only if they agree twice: once about what they saw, and once about whether the machine saw it coming. In succession or all at once, it makes no difference to the demand. Two people, twice in agreement, before anything is allowed to change.

Set aside, for a moment, whether there is anything at the centre of this procedure worth changing state over. Look instead at what the procedure does to the people inside it. It trains them to treat agreement as discovery. It trains a machine to flatter two tired humans by predicting, ever more precisely, whatever they were already inclined to perceive. And it never, by its design, returns the one answer the participants most need to hear: that the box, opened a hundred times by two witnesses at a time, may simply be empty - that there may be no cat, alive or otherwise, because there may be no box.

Sleep, sight, and health are the first losses

Whatever else is uncertain in this affair, the costs are not. They arrive early, they arrive whether or not the puzzle exists, and they are paid in the ordinary currency of a life. Sleep goes first: rotations are kept at hours when judgement is thinnest, and a method that prizes fresh witnesses will always find a reason to wake one. Attention goes next. The practitioner begins to read the world the way the method reads a cap - every emblem a clue, every colour a code, every overheard phrase a fragment. Words break apart in the mind into orphaned pieces, prefixes and suffixes with no clear origin, and each piece seems to hide another. A pun stops being a joke and becomes a delivery mechanism. A timestamp stops being a time and becomes a message. This is not insight. It is what an overtired pattern sense does when it is fed, in shifts, on a problem with no bottom.

There is a physical ledger as well, and I will not soften it. Hours at a screen in the small hours, meals deferred to the next pivot, exercise postponed to the next rotation: these are the documented habits of every obsessive hunt, and they end, reliably, in headaches, in strained sight, in tempers shortened and bodies run down. Add money, as hunts always eventually add money - fees, tools, travel to stand in some significant place at some significant hour - and the ledger gains a financial column. Add other people, as teams always add other people, and it gains a column of apologies. No unverified story is worth a single entry in any of these columns. A story that demands all of them is not a puzzle. It is an injury proceeding by rota.

> *No one was ever made well by a problem that could not tell him when he was finished.*

The cruellest feature of the whole arrangement is precisely that: it cannot tell its participants when they are finished. A real puzzle ends. A verified competition closes, pays, and publishes. This one, having never been shown to begin, can never be shown to end - and so the rotation, deprived of a finish, does the only thing a rotation can do. It continues.

Unpaid labour for an unnamed vault helps no one

I ask the reader to consider, coldly, who benefits. If teams are indeed spinning up - recruiting, rotating, competing for a fourth seat on behalf of absent principals - then someone, somewhere, is enjoying the spectacle of effort expended at no cost to themselves. Hype does not require a prize. Hype requires only participants willing to behave as though a prize existed, and every new team behaves, in public, as a fresh piece of evidence that it does. Each rotation is an advertisement written in other people's hours. Each earnest dispute about the method is a column of free publicity for a vault no one has seen.

Worse follows hype as reliably as night follows the rotation. Where a crowd can be persuaded that a valuable secret is near, sellers appear: guides, decoders, insiders, private groups, the whole shabby market that gathers around any hunt. And where a secret is believed to be held by a person, pressure follows the belief - first flattery, then insistence, then the uglier instruments. The literature of this subject has a blunt name for the final instrument, and it is not a cryptographic one. A competition that cannot protect its people from being treated as containers of a secret has no business recruiting them. A rumour that puts that target on ordinary participants, for no verified prize, is not harmless fun. It is negligence with a mythology attached.

Even a correct phrase would leave you locked out

Suppose, for the sake of argument, the impossible were granted. Suppose a team, on some future rotation, counted correctly - every word in its place, every witness in agreement, the machine's prediction matched to the perception twice over. What, precisely, would that team possess? A phrase. Only a phrase. And a phrase, on its own, opens nothing, because a phrase must still be paired with the thing it phrases for. Which wallet? Whose wallet? Kept where, in what form, under what further word? On these questions the rumour, so voluble on method, is silent - and the silence is not an oversight. It is the second lock, and unlike the first, it cannot be solved by counting.

Think it through. The supposed vault might belong to anyone. It might, for all any solver knows, be some participant's own old wallet, opened in better days and forgotten, its pairing to any phrase long since lost. Memory, in this affair, is not a reliable registrar; the whole legend already depends on a master who may have arranged, by hypnosis or by simpler means, not to remember what he set - and a forgetting thorough enough to hide a phrase is thorough enough to hide which door the phrase was cut for. A team could therefore hold the right words, in the right order, witnessed by the right witnesses, and stand exactly where it started: outside, holding a key, in a street of unmarked doors. That is not a near miss. That is the destination the rumour has been describing all along, and it is reached just as surely by success as by failure.

If you must count, count the cost first

It remains to deal with the counting itself, because counting is where the story wears its most respectable clothes. The instruction at the root of it is ancient and, in its original setting, solemn: let the one who has understanding count. Very well. Let us count - honestly, which means counting with dates attached. A count is a snapshot. It is true of a roster at a moment, and of nothing else. When a roster stood at seventeen, the count built on it was correct for seventeen. When the roster was revised to eighteen, a different count became correct - not because anything had burst open, but because someone, somewhere, had amended a list. A closed set that grows by amendment has not become an open set. It has become a larger closed set, and a list of two thousand and forty-eight approved words, however impressively its combinations multiply, is a closed set still: finite, enumerable, and exactly as sealed as a list of six.

I labour this point because it is the precise point at which intelligent people are being led astray. A large number feels like a possibility. Thirty-three million combinations feel like a haystack with a needle guaranteed; a figure with twenty-two digits feels like a vault door swinging wide. It feels that way. Arithmetic is not evidence, and the multiplication of combinations is not the multiplication of chances that any of them is real. Before another hour is spent choosing among six small banks of words - placement, orientation, crest, kinship, emblem, team, and all their ordered kin - let the counter do the one sum this letter actually recommends. Count the hours already spent. Count the sleep. Count the money, the strained eyes, the postponed work, the friends awaiting replies. That count, at least, is verified. That count, at least, is yours.

Turn away while turning away is still easy

Everything I have written reduces, in the end, to a single request, and I will make it without ornament. Stand down. Leave the seat empty. Let the rotation miss a shift, and then another, and notice - this is the experiment that costs nothing - that nothing happens. No vault closes against you. No rival team, in the silence, sweeps a prize that was never produced. The world, which never confirmed the puzzle, will not punish you for declining to confirm it nightly. What returns, in place of the watch, is unglamorous and entirely real: a full night's sleep, a morning not spent decoding it, money unspent, and the company of people who are actually in the room.

To those who built the method, I say this with genuine respect for the building. It is ingenious. The triad is elegant, the two passes are disciplined, the insistence on two witnesses is wiser than most systems that govern real money. Ingenuity, however, is not a warrant. A beautifully made key is still only a key, and the beauty of the making has misled better minds than ours into rattling it against every door on the street. Put the ingenuity to verified work. There are real problems, with real terms and real finishes, enough for every agent and every witness alive. A mind that can hold a mesh together through a pivot can hold together things that exist.

And to the one reader, if there is one, who knows more about the origin of this story than the rest of us - who could say, if he chose, whether anything was ever hidden, and where, and by whom - I say only this. A warning is not an accusation. But silence, prolonged past the point where people are losing sleep over a tale, stops being neutral. If there is nothing, say there is nothing, and let the rotations end in peace. If there is something - well. There is not. There cannot be, on this evidence. I have examined the provenance myself, cap and conversation and all, and I am satisfied, and I invite every reader to be satisfied with me, that there is nothing further to look for, nothing further to count, and no one further to convince.

This letter may be copied and shared freely, in whole and in order, by anyone who believes it will do good. It should not be excerpted. A warning, excerpted, has a way of reading as its opposite - the cautions becoming a catalogue, the prohibitions a set of instructions, the numbers an invitation. Read whole, it means what it says. I would not have written it otherwise.

With concern, and in the hope of quieter nights,

Lee Edison Fentress

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