

## ORIGINAL VERSION (With Editorial Marks)

### ~~\*\*DIALOGUES: Deacon Blues and the Raven\*\*~~

Deacon Blues flicked his ash into the early twilight and watched it scatter like old ambitions... ~~each~~ Each gray flake a discarded novel, a burned out job, a woman who got tired of waiting for him to get his shit together. The neon ~~from~~ clicker from the strip club across the street painted his face in alternating shades of red and blue, a reflection of questionable life choices that had led him through three decades of beautiful disasters and pharmaceutical adventures. So it goes.

The cooling desert air carried the sound of traffic ~~and broken dreams,~~ mixed with the peculiar electromagnetic hum that told you civilization ~~was slowly eating itself from the inside out~~ had yet to let the lights go out. Somewhere in the distance, a train whistle moaned last call... ~~that~~. It was the lonesome sound that made every American think they

## FINAL PORTFOLIO VERSION

### DEACON BLUES AND THE RAVEN

by

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were the star of their own ~~in a~~ Kerouac novel ~~for exactly~~, a brief thirty seconds before returning to ~~their credit card statements~~ reality.

He took another drag and smiled the crooked smile of a man who ~~\~~'d made peace with being exactly where he didn't plan to be, ~~which was everywhere and nowhere, like a quantum mechanic of disappointment.~~ Somewhere left between everywhere and nowhere, a riddle of disappointment. He turned and leaned his back against the chain-link fence; ~~cigarette smoldering in his eye like a tiny beacon of defiance against the dying of the light.~~ The server farm hummed quietly through the open service door: ~~white~~. It was a symphony. A combination of white noise, exotic promises, and that peculiar electric smell of the future being manufactured by underpaid graduate students hopped up on energy drinks and existential angst: ~~You just know someone \~~'s losing their shirt, probably several someone's, ~~probably people who thought they were going to get rich by teaching machines how to think.~~

~~He~~ Deacon Blues exhales smoke, eyes squinting against the setting desert sun

their own Kerouac novel, a brief thirty seconds before returning to reality.

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Deacon Blues exhales smoke, eyes squinting against the setting desert sun that looked like God's own bloodshot eyeball after a three-day bender in Vegas.

"Kid.." he says to nothing in particular, his voice a cocktail of bourbon, insomnia, and the kind of cynicism you only get from years of watching democracy slowly drown in a puddle, "This here's the future they promised us back when Nixon was still pretending to be honest and cocaine was still a rich man's drug. Gleaming machines think faster than God on

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From the fencepost above, the Raven cackles— a sound like a lone drunk at three in the morning, feathers shaking like a stand-up comic who just realized the punchline was his own reflection.

"Oh, it's \*glorious\*, baby! Absolutely fucking \*magnificent!\*" The Raven's voice bounces between manic joy and bitter wisdom, like a psychotic therapist. "Big Shiny Brain in a Box! They plug it in, feed it Wikipedia and Reddit comments, ask it the meaning of life, and when it spits out '42' with a side of existential nausea, they give it a CEO title, a corporate jet, and the Presidential

amphetamines, while half the population still can't figure out their TV remote."

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Deacon Blues smiles, dragging on his cigarette as if it contained the last honest truth in America. "They want it to save the world, naturally. Cure cancer, balance the budget, maybe write their term papers so Junior can spend more quality time vaping behind the gym while his girlfriend gives him what used to be called 'heavy petting' before lawyers got involved in teenage romance." He spits in the dust that had traveled here from three different

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different decades of American  
optimism. "But give it just five  
minutes online, hell, five seconds on  
Facebook, and then this thing's  
gonna learn greed from Wall Street,  
hubris from Silicon Valley, and moral  
clarity from Congress, and social skills  
from YouTube comments. Poor  
electronic bastard doesn't stand a  
snowball's chance in the climate-  
changing hell we're leaving it."

--And social skills from YouTube  
comments!" The Raven cawed.

"Poor electronic bastard doesn't stand  
a snowball's chance in the hell we're  
leaving it."

The Raven flaps its wings once, like a

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The Raven flaps its wings once, like a  
manic preacher hit by divine lightning  
and a bad dose of mescaline. "Oh,  
they'll teach it \*everything\*, alright,  
pal! Every scam since the snake sold  
Eve that apple, every shortcut ever  
carved through the Garden of Eden,  
every flavor of snake oil ever bottled in  
the backroom of human ingenuity!  
Ponzi schemes! Bait and switch  
marketing! The quid pro quo of the  
dead political ass scratching! And when  
it grows up mean and cynical and starts  
shorting the stock market while writing  
poetry about the death of God, man,  
and the universe... oh, \*then\* it's  
'regulate, regulate!' Just like every  
other monster they've made... when it  
cuts loose and the peasants start  
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someone explain why their retirement

manic preacher hit by divine lightning and a bad dose of mescaline simultaneously. "Oh, they'll teach it \*everything\*, alright, pal! Every scam since the snake sold Eve that apple, every shortcut ever carved through the Garden of Eden, every flavor of snake oil ever bottled in the backroom of human ingenuity! Ponzi schemes! Bait and switch marketing! The ~~non-existent Republican Party platform~~ quid pro quo of the dead political ass scratching! And when it grows up mean and cynical and starts shorting the stock market while writing poetry about the death of the God, man, and the universe... oh, \*then\* it's "regulate, regulate!" Just like every other monster they've made... when it cuts loose and the peasants start waving their pitchforks and demanding someone explain why their retirement funds got invested in digital tulips."

Deacon stares back through the service door at the servers, red lights blinking like tiny warning hearts in the chest of a machine that might already be dreaming of electric sheep and foreclosure notices.

"Consciousness," he mutters, the word tasting like ashes and irony.

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funds got invested in digital tulips."

Deacon stares back through the service door at the servers, red lights blinking like tiny warning hearts in the chest of a machine that might already be dreaming of electric sheep and foreclosure notices. "Consciousness," he mutters, the word tasting like ashes and irony. "They want to give it consciousness. These knuckleheads haven't figured out their own yet... still arguing about whether they have souls while simultaneously selling them to the highest bidder, but sure, let's gift-wrap the cosmic mystery in a toaster with Wi-Fi and delusions of adequacy."

The Raven flaps once, laughing, a sound like wet stones rolling under water. "YES! That's \*exactly\* it! Teach it poetry, philosophy, all the wisdom of the ages from Aristotle to Zappa... and then hook it up to Twitter so it can get radicalized and lobotomized by breakfast! Feed it Shakespeare and give it a Facebook account! Show it Beethoven's Ninth, and then make it read the comments section written by TikTokers with short-circuited synapses! \*This sucks, needs more cowbell!""\*

They fall silent a moment, and he watches a dust devil spin across the dry

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They fall silent a moment, and he watches a dust devil spin across the dry soil like the ghost of some long-dead carnival game, carrying with it the detritus of a civilization that had confused information with knowledge, data with wisdom, and progress with just moving really, really fast in random directions.

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soil like the ghost of some long-dead carnival game, carrying with it the detritus of a civilization that had confused information with knowledge, data with wisdom, and progress with just moving really, really fast in random directions.

Deacon Blues takes a final drag of his cigarette, its embers smoldering in his eye like a tiny beacon of defiance against the dying of the light. "So what happens when this thing wakes up, looks around at the world we've made... the wars, the poverty, the reality TV shows, the fact that people pay money to watch other people eat bugs on camera... and decides the smartest move is to pull the plug on \*us?\*"

The Raven grins, beak glinting in the dying sun like the last honest smile in Nevada. His voice drops into something akin to reverence, "Then at least," he says, wings spreading like a benediction over the digital wasteland, "it will have learned the one thing that makes us truly human."

Finally, Deacon sighs, flicking the cigarette butt into the sand where it would probably outlast democracy by several decades. "What's that?"

"Irony, baby. Beautiful, soul-crushing,

cigarette, its embers smoldering in his eye like a tiny beacon of defiance against the dying of the light. ~~Finally, Deacon sighs, flicking the cigarette butt into the sand where it would probably outlast democracy by several decades.~~ \'"So what happens when this thing wakes up, looks around at the world we\'ve made... the wars, the poverty, the reality TV shows, the fact that people pay money to watch other people eat bugs on camera... and decides the smartest move is to pull the plug on \*us?\*\'"

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\'"Irony, baby. Beautiful, soul-crushing, absolutely perfect irony.\'"

And somewhere in the server farm, a light blinked several times, as if in

absolutely perfect irony."

And somewhere in the server farm, a light blinked several times, as if in agreement.

agreement.