

New Fiction by Benjamin Inks: Contract



On Monday I wore a cowboy hat to work—just to see if I could.

Employees at Brick Albert seldom break the unspoken dress code of a Costco button-down paired with either khaki, black, or navy-blue slacks. Once you get pegged as dressing a certain way, any deviation only invites conversation, and I don't like talking about myself.

My usual social strategy is this:

On Fridays I ask about weekend plans. On Mondays I follow up. Tuesday–Thursday I chat about the weather. This is how I've survived nine years of bureaucratic drudgery as a budget and defense contractor for the federal government. It's not that I'm anti-social or dislike my coworkers, I just can't connect with personas. The social masks and constrained sense of *self* we curate in order to belong. Personality is threatening. Preference for one thing implies rejection of another. A flourish of fashion can make the boldest of statements against the backdrop of a corporate milieu. So I wore the damn cowboy hat to challenge my comfort with conformity.

Walking down the row of cubicles, heads began to turn.

Who does he think he is?

What, is the rodeo in town?

Daaayum—that's a fine Stetson.

I wore it loud and proud and kept it on booting up my desktop—still with the classic Microsoft hum. I half expected a talking-to. Quietly pulled into the boss's office and asked

to doff my garish headwear, citing the employee handbook.

"If it were up to me," I imagined him saying, "we'd all wear Crocs and tracksuits, but this is Brick Albert, goddamn it—we crunch numbers for the military-industrial complex."

But when my boss laid eyes on my glorious headpiece, he worked his jaw in confusion and/or intimidation. Since time immemorial volume has always conveyed power. If ever cornered by a wild animal, thrust your bag or coat atop your head and puff yourself up bigger.

The day ended with my cowboy hat still adorned, which left me wondering:

What the fuck else could I get away with?

On Tuesday I tried sunglasses. Wayfarer Ray-Bans—as if hungover or concealing a black eye. Less ostentatious on arrival than my cowboy hat, until I stormed into our 11 a.m. meeting like a poker shark and took my seat at the conference table. Funny thing was—it was my best meeting ever. I felt none of the social anxiety that usually cripples my communication and has me stuttering all over myself. All points were made in short, concise fashion, staring everyone dead in the eye whether they knew it or not.

"Johnson!" my boss called, miffed by the glasses but not wanting to interrupt the meeting's clockwise flow. "Where are we with the Predator missiles?"

I assured him my spreadsheet would be in his inbox by COB Friday. He glared as if in contest but quickly blinked and lost, unable to penetrate my 15% VLT lenses. His usually baritone voice cracked calling on the next man:

"Gregson! Brief me on spare tank parts."

On Wednesday I combined both cowboy hat and sunglasses. My boss gave little reaction other than to study me up and down through suspicious eyes, wondering if he should renege after allowing both items on the floor.

On Thursday I pushed things further with a muscley tank-top fit for the beach. Women in my office go sleeveless every day, always perceived as elegant and still business casual. But if a man bares his arms he looks like a thug.

“Johnson!” my boss cried from afar, and *here we go*, I thought, I’d finally broke him, skirting conventions all week long, and now pushed through a nebulous yet not-to-be-crossed boundary. I couldn’t tell if I’d been fighting my boss or if my boss was puppet for some sort of unkillable ideal—a primordial organizing principle existing since before the Big Bang, first made manifest on Earth when one alpha caveman combed his hair with a pinecone and demanded others do the same.

I turned in anticipation of a confrontation but was struck open-jaw by what I saw. My boss with a shit-eating grin, *Top Gun* aviators concealing both eyes and brows.

“Johnson!” he said again, “I didn’t know you pumped iron, you son of a bitch!”

By Friday my bohemian attempts at self-discovery and/or rebellion had caught fire and spread throughout Brick Albert. Gregson came in wearing a Lakers jersey and a white UV sleeve, but that was tame in comparison to the leopard tights, sequin polos, and spikey punk jackets other coworkers dusted out of high school wardrobes as if in a fashion cold war against the world. People rode skateboards while wearing LARPing chainmail down hallways and spat dip into shiny red cups. We hadn’t yet devolved into using said cups for beer pong, but I suspected

such antics were right around the corner. The bathrooms permeated vape and cigarette smoke, and some of our most gifted employees had a never-ending table of Magic: The Gathering set up in the breakroom. The damn thing was that within one week of eschewing esthetic and behavioral norms productivity tripled. Brick Albert was producing enough sophisticated and high-grade weaponry to wage war against a hypothetical Mars of equal population and technological prowess. We all received bonuses—a healthy direct deposit some of us used to break away in search of more fulfilling work, though from what I gather their souls were quickly ground to dust by a return to corporate values. The Ping-Pong and puppy yoga of Silicon Valley wasn't shit compared to Brick Albert. I'm talking a total and complete expression of the autonomous and individuated *self*, no matter how vain, silly, or OSHA non-compliant. One and all was accepted here for who they were—so long as they hit their quota. Even I wouldn't fucker with my Christmas bonus. So eight hours a day, five days a week, my ass was in my cubicle. Sure, sometimes with a *Fear and Loathing* Boonie cap and filtered cigarette between my teeth, sometimes with my white, squeaky Snoopy slippers warming my feet, but in my cubicle nonetheless.

Although our daily tasks were still the same, our workdays felt less tedious no longer hiding who we were. One way of coping with the Kafkaesque support of a global killing machine was to comment on it openly. On Monday my boss wore a true-to-life Darth Vader costume he had won in a vicious bidding war on eBay. Equipped with a soundbox that emitted labored breath noises, ironically, this was the first time I saw my boss as a real person—and not a mere arbiter of pointless tasks and standards—after he had turned himself into a machine-man to parody our industry. I would have never known he enjoyed anything other than busting our balls had we not created a culture in which he felt free to express himself. We both

agreed, *Empire* was the GOAT, and puppet Yoda was far superior to CGI.

It wasn't just my boss, this new injection of culture allowed almost everyone to become a clearer, more vivid person in my mind's eye. Carol in HR brought in her Pomeranians. I learned adopting Hugsie and Mugsie kept her sane after becoming a sudden divorcee and empty-nestor. Gregson and I hit it off over beat 'em up videogames; we'd both been raised on *Street Fighter* and thought it would be fun to meet at an arcade after work. For the first time in my near decade-long career, I finally had a friend.

The sudden warm regard we all had for each other caused us to question if Brick Albert could be better utilized helping humanity rather than mass-producing cruel and vicious weaponry used for killing and maiming from a climate-controlled cockpit suspiciously resembling a racing-game pod 7,000 miles away from the target enemy.

Are we the bad guys? we all began to wonder after unpacking the implications behind our boss's cosplay. A psychological injury began to take hold, affecting Brick Albert's morale. Although still free to be me, I questioned the quality of the me I was becoming in support of such a mission. This new and unconscious belief we all harbored trickled into work performance. The scientists and designers drafted concepts meant to stun rather than kill. Unsurprisingly, there were few buyers interested in stunning their enemies into submission. General carelessness caused me to delay shipment of small arms to a developing nation often fixated upon by CNN, which upset a major revolution contrary to the interest of Brick Albert. When these sorts of mistakes happen, it's never the person responsible who is punished. In this case it was my Darth Vader, *Top Gun*-loving boss who was replaced by an even sterner version of himself. This new boss was mostly cheekbones with a

disproportionate amount of white to the pupils in his eyes, as if perpetually afraid or overstimulated.

Within a week, any public display of personality was immediately deemed inappropriate. Cubicles were stripped of décor, and the employee handbook was affixed to the walls of every common area. Under a culture of fear and conformity productivity resumed its normal trajectory. Stockholders rejoiced. Yet in lieu of being able to think for ourselves, whatever moral reservations we held about our work evaporated. As did previous memories of the former Brick Albert. The most difficult loss in all of this was the slow inevitable reversion of the friends I'd come to know so well back to business-casual colleagues—personas who saved their fun for the weekends and talked about the weather on days in between.