

“The Audit” © Rachel May

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## The Audit

Bill turned the mower off at the top of his sloping lawn and surveyed his handiwork. Alternating segments of taller and shorter grass filled the half-acre expanse with an intricate calligraphic pattern, like a Mayan hieroglyph. He had carefully spaced the design so that he could go back with one pass and obliterate it into a flat carpet to match those of all his neighbors, but first he wanted a moment to enjoy his ephemeral earth art.

"Dad! Come quick!" David was running toward him across the lawn, jumping instinctively across the unmown strips. His face was ashen and his eyes huge. "Dad! You've got to come. We got the Audit." The boy's normally high voice took on a husky rasp as he pronounced the last words.

"An audit? You make it sound like a fatal illness," Bill responded to his anxiety-prone son with a practiced calmness, as David grabbed his hand and started pulling him towards the house. "Relax, Davey. It's not that big a deal. Our taxes are all in order."

David looked up at him hopefully, then down at the design in the lawn. His voice softened. "Nice one, Dad. Maybe you should leave it this way. Our own corn maze."

"Yeah. If only the town would allow such a thing."

"What do you mean?"

"Strict rules, my boy. These are the suburbs. Everyone's lawn has to look exactly the same."

"That's weird."

As soon as they entered the house, Bill felt David's hand tighten and his shoulders stiffen. Bill's wife Laurie was standing at the computer in the family room, biting her lip, while their daughter Jess looked on with an inscrutable expression.

"C'mon, everybody. It's just an audit, right?" Bill tried the soothing tone again. "What's the big deal? We're as likely to get taxes back as to owe them."

"It's not a tax audit, honey. It's the new one." Laurie's voice had a touch of the same husky terror he had heard from David.

"Yeah, Dad. You know, the GCA?" Jess added, with the practiced superiority of a 14-year-old.

"GCA?"

David's voice rose to a squeak. "I heard they take your house and car and everything!"

Laurie came over to give David a hug while Bill sat down, bewildered, at the computer.

"Now I'm sure it's not that bad. Let me take a look." He was embarrassed to admit he hadn't heard of the GCA, when even his fifth-grader seemed to know all about it.

Big yellow letters on a dark blue screen spelled out GLOBAL CLIMATE AUDIT. Every effort to surf away from the page resulted in the same message: "You have been selected for the GCA. Internet service will be restored after you complete your climate footprint calculation."

"You have to do it, Dad. It's international law." Jess said. She reached over and clicked on the arrow to enter the site. "Besides, I think it's a good thing if we have to stop guzzling gas and living like we own the whole planet."

David gasped, and Laurie snapped at Jess. "That's enough of that. Come on. We've got to get to David's soccer game. Bye, honey," she added, to Bill. "I'm sure it will be fine." She emphasized her last point with a stony determination, as if willing it to be true.

It didn't give Bill much confidence as he stared at the Climate Footprint Calculator on the screen. It was essentially a detailed inventory of their daily habits. The GCA already had a surprising wealth of information about them: the amount of gas they bought each week for the SUV, how many BTUs it took to heat and cool their six-bedroom house, how much hot water they used, even what percentage of strawberries they bought came from Chile. At one point he called his credit card company to complain that this outfit had hacked into his records.

"No worries, sir. That's the GCA. They have treaty rights to that information. It will not be used for any purpose other than calculating your carbon overdraft."

*Overdraft.* That sounded ominous. Bill finished the online questionnaire. Shortly after he hit SEND, a graphic appeared showing three round pictures of Earth and an additional wedge with most of the Americas. The caption read:

"Your carbon footprint is 3.4 times the acceptable global mean. If everyone generated your level of greenhouse gases, 3.4 planet Earths would be required to accommodate the emissions. The terms of the Global Climate Accord require that you reduce your footprint as follows..."

They were giving the family a year to get the number down below three, and two more years to get it to one, on penalty of severe fines. Bill had two weeks to present the GCA with a plan. There was a website where he could go for advice about steps he could take and financial assistance, if need be. The screen politely asked him to accept these terms so he could get back into his browser.

Bill didn't think he could blithely hit "ACCEPT" the way he did whenever iTunes updated its terms of service. This GCA was deep in his credit card data and might have the power to hold him to it. He called Laurie's sister, who was a lawyer.

"Sorry, Bill. The GCA is the real deal. The US and every other nation on Earth signed an agreement this year to enforce its terms. I can't believe you hadn't heard about it. World leaders have been trying to pass a global climate policy framework for decades, but the best the cowards could do was shift the burden from governments onto individuals. People all around the world are getting audited, and credit card companies and utilities are obligated to furnish quantitative information about their consumption patterns."

"Tell me about it. It's as if they had informers everywhere—our gas tank, our fridge, probably my underwear drawer. So you're saying I should accept the terms?"

"I don't think you have a choice. There's some fine print you can read at the website that may give you a way around their requirements, but they tried to make this treaty have teeth."

So Bill went ahead and nervously clicked the fateful button. It was a relief to see his browser pop up as if nothing had happened. Except that in one corner there hovered a blue box with yellow letters, which periodically flashed a message, saying "You have 14 days remaining to complete your climate action plan."

Bill went back outside and finished mowing the lawn. As he started the engine the fumes brought to mind those 3.4 Earths and took all the pleasure out of his lawn art project.

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The following Saturday Bill found himself driving along a rutted dirt road in the Adirondack Mountains. It was slow going, what with all the downed trees and mudslides. According to the weather report, a freak tropical storm had just hit the area and caused major damage. Then again, was there any such thing as freak storms anymore? There seemed to be one happening somewhere on any given week.

He was making this trip because of the fine print. Just as he and Laurie were despairing of creating a credible plan without making all of David's worst fears come true, they saw this statement on the GCA website:

"An auditee may request a partial exemption from the mandated carbon footprint reduction. An auditee wishing to apply for the exemption must (a) make all reasonable efforts to reduce his or her own carbon footprint and (b) obtain the written endorsement of a person whose carbon footprint is below the mean global allowable limit."

Laurie had been overjoyed, but when Jess heard about it, she made a scene. "It's so, like, medieval! We read in history about this thing supposedly pious Christians used to do, paying someone else to atone for their sins. They called it *selling indulgences*."

"No one's talking about paying someone for an endorsement," Laurie retorted.

"Right, and someone who's done all that hard stuff to reduce her carbon footprint is going to turn around—for free—and say, *Sure, Mr. Fulton, I'm down with you commuting to work alone in your gas-guzzling SUV from your heat-guzzling McMansion in the middle of nowhere?*"

"Young lady, we provide you with very full life. Look around you at all the bounty we enjoy. How dare you be so snide about it?"

"Sorry, Mom. You're right," Jess said. She opened a closet door and made a grand Vanna White gesture at the plastic containers that filled it to bursting: wrapping paper, ornaments, spare dish towels, wedding presents they hadn't ever used. "I'll let the audit be snide about the bounty we enjoy."

Over the next few days, Laurie did endless research about carbon footprints around the world. There were plenty of people in Africa and Asia whose emissions were well below the limit, shockingly low, really. But flying to another continent to enlist their help would have added another big dose of CO2 to their family's already daunting total.

Then Bill remembered his brother Dan telling him about a guy who had worked at his company for a few years and then just quit and gone off to live in his grandfather's old cabin in the Adirondack

Mountains. He was completely off the grid, no phone, even, but Dan had visited him once and was able to pinpoint the location on his GPS.

And now, according to that GPS, Bill was 1.2 miles from his destination. His salvation, perhaps. The road headed downhill into a heavily forested area. Just as Bill's eyes adjusted to the dim light, he had to slam on the brakes. Ahead of him, the road just—vanished. He climbed out of the vehicle to look more closely and saw that the lowest stretch of road had washed away, leaving a gully of stones and mud. A stream ran happily along its new channel.

Bill grabbed his papers from the car, climbed around the washout, and set off along the remainder of the road. It was really just two parallel tracks in the dirt that straddled a line of weeds and sharp stones. As he headed uphill, the woods thinned and the stream gave way to a wide wetland. Bill supposed he must have passed a beaver dam. White birch trunks jutted up here and there in the flooded expanse, and something else—a blue heron?—stood in the water, eerily motionless. And perfectly silent. Bill realized he could hear the distant gurgle of water, the humming of dragonfly wings, and—nothing else.

A loud knocking sound broke the silence. Bill looked around for a big woodpecker. Then, as he rounded a bend, he saw a tall man in overalls fitting a plank of wood to the side of a small shed or outhouse. The man glanced up at Bill and said, matter-of-factly, but lisping through the penny nails he held in his mouth, "Could you hol' it up?"

Bill steadied the board as requested, and the two men finished nailing up the rest of the wall before either one spoke again.

"Thank you kindly," said the man, giving a slight nod and gazing at Bill through clear, merry blue eyes. He spoke without any trace of awkwardness or even curiosity, as if Bill's appearance on the road had been no more remarkable than that of a squirrel.

Bill, on the other hand, felt suddenly shy. "Are you Goodwin Brown? I'm Bill Fulton—Dan's brother. From Syracuse."

"Well, nice to meet you, Bill Fulton."

Goodwin's intonation suggested the conversation was over. No doubt he had other chores to take care of. Bill noticed he hadn't asked after Dan; apparently he wasn't one for small talk.

"If you're looking for the trail to the summit, it's that way," Goodwin remarked, as he collected a few scattered nails. "Good time for picking blueberries."

Bill looked awkwardly down at the papers he was carrying. He was sure he looked sorely out of place.

"Actually, I came to have a chat with you. Do you have a few minutes? Or anything else I could help out with?"

Goodwin eyed him, and the papers, for a moment, then shrugged, "Sure. Don't see why not. Let's get some water."

Instead of heading up to the cabin, which stood about thirty yards uphill from the shed, they walked a little further along the road to an open field of milkweed and cornflowers. A pipe stuck up from the

field and water flowed out of it in a high arc, creating a small pond in a depression behind it. Goodwin unhooked a ladle from a tree branch nearby and handed it to Bill, who realized he was supposed to fill it with water and drink. The water was startlingly cold for a summer day, pure and delicious.

"Is that a natural spring? I thought springs just barely bubbled out of the ground."

"This one's a gusher," Goodwin said with satisfaction. "It's why my grandfather built his house here."

There was a makeshift bench nearby, and they sat down side-by-side in the sun, waving away a cloud of midges.

"Well, chat away," Goodwin said, brightly.

That calm good cheer unnerved Bill more than anything. He himself felt anything but calm. So much was riding on this request, and he suddenly felt its utter unreasonableness.

"The truth is... The truth is, I came to ask you a favor."

Goodwin nodded sagely. "You did me a favor back there. It's only fair."

"This is a very different kind of favor."

Bill explained, as best he could, about the GCA and his family's quandary. As he concluded, he tried to match his host's matter-of-fact directness: "So I'm asking you to give me your endorsement."

Goodwin sat silently for a good twenty seconds, chewing on a blade of grass. Then he threw back his head and laughed. It was a full, whooping laugh that rocked his whole body and threatened to tip over the rickety bench. Like a force of nature. Bill watched in awe for a moment, half tempted to join in, but his mirth quickly changed to despair. He folded his papers with shaking fingers and stood up.

"You're not leaving?" Goodwin gasped, through his laughter.

"I thought... You're right, it's laughable." Bill shoved the papers in his back pocket. "It was nice to meet you."

"Stop! I'm not laughing at you." Goodwin stifled a giggle. "It's the irony of the whole thing. Whoever would have thought that a summit of world leaders could come up with something so... so poetic?"

"Poetic?" Gingerly, Bill sat back down.

"Asking people to seek out their opposites and justify their lives to each other. Don't they know that's the stuff revolutions are made of?" He chuckled some more, shaking his head, then added, "I'll gladly sign your endorsement, but only if you will join me for dinner. It's a bit lonely out here since the road washed out."

"It's a little more than signing a form. You have to report your carbon footprint, too, and promise to keep it below the limit they've established."

"Well, that's an easy promise to make. I've got the life I need right here."

So Bill stayed for dinner. He helped dig up some onions and potatoes and gather some blueberries, and Goodwin made home fries over a propane burner and scrambled eggs from the hens that

wandered around a fenced enclosure behind the cabin. He had the habit, as he worked, of talking to himself in a singsong voice. Bill supposed it was just a byproduct of living alone, until he recognized some lines from something he had had to memorize in high school. He joined in on the conclusion:

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,  
But I have promises to keep,  
And miles to go before I sleep,  
And miles to go before I sleep.

Goodwin beamed at him appreciatively. "Sorry about that. Living alone, you have to find ways to keep yourself company."

As they sat down to eat at the plank table, Bill discovered he was tremendously hungry, and the food tasted better than anything he had tried in a long time. Before long, he became aware that Goodwin was watching him wolf it down.

"Don't they feed you down there in the suburbs?"

"It's just... I can't remember the last time I was this hungry."

"Clean mountain air does that," Goodwin said with satisfaction. "I've been thinking about this audit. It's brilliant, really. They're going to create a whole constituency of people demanding alternatives to the carbon-intensive system Americans depend on."

"I don't know. Laurie and I have racked our brains, but it seems impossible to reduce the carbon emissions and still keep our home and our jobs and our kids in school."

"Exactly. So you'll start figuring out what you need—good bus service, wind farms, bike highways, zoning that allows you to keep chickens and grow vegetables instead of lawns..."

"Tell me about it. We're not even allowed to hang our laundry out to dry."

"And once there are enough of you," Goodwin concluded, "you'll change the whole geography of your lives."

"But first," Bill replied wryly, "Miles to go before we sleep."

"Nonsense," Goodwin retorted, with a twinkle in his eye. "I have a spare futon. It's too dark to leave now anyway. You can get a fresh start in the morning."

Bill lay awake for a while, listening to the wind in the trees, the rustlings of the woods, and—was that an owl? The futon was lumpy and the pillow scratchy, and he hadn't been able to call Laurie to explain he was staying the night, so he tossed and turned at first. But the mountain air that filled his lungs and the glimpse of a universe full of stars through the window silenced his worries and he soon fell asleep.

In the morning, they assessed Goodwin's carbon footprint at about 0.7 of the desired limit. Bill was surprised it was that high, given how he grew his own food and got his electricity from a little turbine in the stream, and how little stuff he had. But Goodwin pointed out that he still lived in America, where so much depends on cars and technology.

"Are you really OK with endorsing my, um, suburban lifestyle?" Bill had to ask, as Goodwin was signing his form. "You haven't even seen my big old SUV down the road, or the huge house we live in."

"I wouldn't dream of endorsing your lifestyle," Goodwin quickly responded. "I'm endorsing my own. I feel truly sorry for anyone who has to live the way you do. This is the least I can do to make your life less miserable."

Bill thought he should be offended, if only for Laurie's sake, but instead he found himself smiling in agreement. The two men exchanged a warm handshake before Bill headed back down the road. This time, he made a point of looking for the beaver dam, and when he spotted the heron again, lurking beside it, it was like seeing an old friend. As he skirted the washout to where his car was parked, the glare of hot sun off the road made him blink.

Everything about his car surprised him now: the luxury of the leather seats, how high he sat above the road, the flawless hum of the engine, and, most of all, the sheer volume of empty space it held. He switched off the GPS and the radio and tried to hold onto that sense of repleteness he had had the night before—full stomach, full lungs, a sky full of stars. He thought about his family's "full life," and it called up the image of their house, with stuff spilling out of every nook and cranny. His daughter's wicked grin as she displayed their "bounty." And Goodwin, with the same glint in his eyes: Don't they know that's the stuff revolutions are made of?

As he drove out of the mountains and into a harsher landscape of strip malls and big box stores, with their endless acres of paved space, Bill felt his tension rising. He took some deep breaths, as he would have advised David to do during a panic attack. With each breath, Bill imagined emptying closet after closet, the cupboards, the chaotic garage, the spare room, the basement, and filling them instead with mountain air. With poetry. He imagined carving a poem into his yard with the lawn mower, and leaving the rest to grow dense with wildflowers. He pictured Laurie and the kids delightedly losing themselves in the maze of its reticulated path.

Bill smiled at the thought, and started chanting every bit of doggerel that had ever lodged in his memory:

...Quoth the raven: 'Nevermore!'

The Owl and the Pussycat went to sea  
In a beautiful pea-green boat...

...And has thou slain the Jabberwock?  
Come to my arms, my beamish boy!

The road headed back into wooded hills for a ways, and Bill pulled onto a turnout surrounded by tall grasses and overlooking a narrow river that was overflowing its banks and roaring with white water. He threw his head back the way Goodwin had. "Callooh! Callay!" he shouted, and laughed until he had filled every capillary in his body with the tingle of it, and every inch of space in the SUV with the sound.