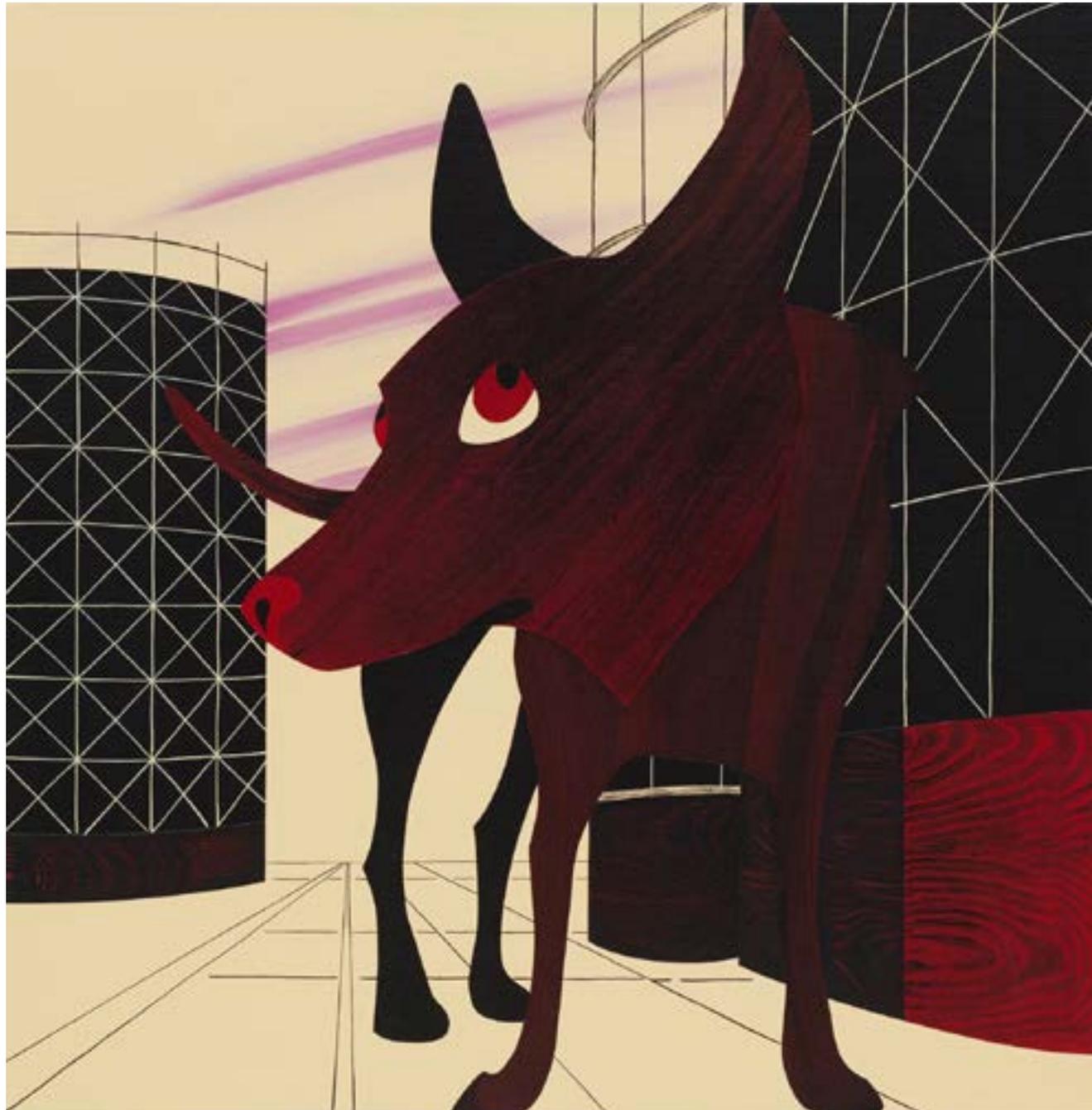


HILARY BAKER

Marcel, Downtown Los Angeles, 2017
Acrylic on canvas, 24 x 24 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST
PHOTO CREDIT: BRIAN FORREST

JUSTIN J. ALLEN

Bangr

The night I met Lance at his high-rise condo in San Francisco's SOMA neighborhood, there was a big glass door that opened to a hundred-foot drop that would instantly kill you. There was no warning, no caution tape, just a few jutting pieces of steel, which if you were lucky you'd grab on to and save your life. "If you're stupid enough to walk out a door without looking at what's below you, you deserve to die," I heard him say at least twice. He followed this with a laugh, like he'd said something devastatingly witty.

He was obviously insane, and a borderline sociopath, but not in the usual Mission Street way. He was rich-people crazy. A huge Barry McGee painting hung on the living room wall, opposite the future crime scene. The biggest flat-screen TV I'd ever seen in someone's home, in crystalline 4K resolution, silently floated a series of jaw-dropping drone video sequences of the Bay Area, New York, the Grand Canyon, and so on, swooping up and down and around, making you feel like one of those suicidal wingsuited BASE jumpers (which, I later learned, Lance was a big fan of).

My first guess was that Lance was an East Coast finance guy who'd just come west to break into tech, probably a cokehead and a technological ignoramus. I was wrong on all accounts: He was an adrenaline junkie, but did not take drugs or even drink; a born West Coaster, from the San Diego suburbs; and a techie himself, specializing in databases, with no connection to the world of finance outside of the Silicon Valley investors he knew—and who occasionally funded his ideas.

I came to the party with Paul Chin, a friend and former coworker.

"Jason's a front-end dev," Paul said, introducing me to Lance in his kitchen as I mixed myself a gin and juice.

"Oh yeah?" Lance said, leaning in, sniffing out competition. Typical alpha nerd. "What's your stack?" he said.

"I'm flexible," I shrugged. "Web and hybrid apps, mostly MEAN, I'm good with Angular but have some mixed feelings about Titanium and PhoneGap."

"They're no worse than Mongo, or any of the NoSQL systems used as a main datastore. They're all disgusting when used that way."

This was supposed to get me riled, but I demurred. "Just give me a REST API and I'll build something awesome around it. I don't give a shit really."

“Lance is all about Hadoop,” Paul said.

“True. But I’m not about any particular tool. I’m about datasets created by millions of people. Representing millions of actions. And extracting massive business value from that data.”

“That’s what we did at freeJack,” Paul said, smirking.

“That’s what we did at freeJack,” Lance repeated.

“Lance made out like a bandit when it was sold to Oracle.”

“I wrote most of the back-end application code.”

I nodded.

“Is that what bought the Barry McGee painting?”

“No, it’s what bought the stocks that I sold six years later to buy that painting.”

“Paul, wanna jet?” I said. “There was that party, remember?”

“Lance has a new startup,” Paul said.

“I’m looking for developers,” Lance said. “But only the best.”

“You and everyone else,” I said, turning to go, “and anyway, I’m not actually looking for a new job.”

“Hold on,” Paul said, “you guys need to chill out and talk over the idea. Just see if it’s a good fit.”

“What? Dude, is this guy paying you a finder’s fee?”

Paul flushed, then grinned with shame.

“He IS going to pay you a finder’s fee!” I shouted.

We all laughed like maniacs then, and it restored the good humor. Yes, we were all out to get each other—“extract business value,” to paraphrase Lance. But it didn’t mean we couldn’t be friends anyway. Friends, of a sort.

“Do a shot with me, you prick,” I said to Paul as I poured two shot glasses of Hangar One Fog Point vodka out of a giant artisan bottle.

“There’s no reason you should believe me,” Paul said, “but I’d help Lance find a new developer even if he wasn’t paying a finder’s fee.”

“I know, I know, I believe you. What’s this startup about?”

“It’s called Bangr,” Lance said.

“Music app? Techno?”

“No,” Lance said. “Matchmaking. You know, dating. Hookups.”

I shook my head, handed Paul his shot. We slammed

them down, and when the burning in my throat receded, I spoke again.

“With a name like that, you’re gonna have nothing but horny dudes and sex workers on there.” Lance didn’t flinch.

“Name’s negotiable. But it’s got to be provocative.” He paused.

“And I have nothing against prostitutes using an app I made.”

“You’ve got nothing against being a digital pimp?”

Lance fell silent. A moment later, Paul started laughing hysterically, and then we all cracked up again.

I started to get drunk, reeling from the vodka shots, and a long-haired dude with a vaporwave T-shirt, Birkenstocks, and prayer beads who was sort of inexplicably at this party—probably he was a would-be Steve Jobs consciously emulating his early years—opened the door to the yawning abyss, sat cross-legged at the edge, and lit a joint. It caused quite a commotion among the guests, as the cold bay wind whipped in—most of them hadn’t realized the drop was there. Soon after, a tall, thin white man in his fifties I hadn’t seen before got right in Lance’s face and started yelling, and I overheard someone say that Lance owned two apartments in the building, and this one was not supposed to be occupied yet.

Everyone was ushered down the hall in a raucous atmosphere brandishing bottles of expensive booze, swigging from them. Paul had the bottle of Hangar One and was wearing his sunglasses at 11:00 p.m. indoors. I’d grabbed a bottle of Hendrick’s Gin, which doomed my chances of making it out to a club that night.

We all crowded, shouting, into an elevator, Lance herding everybody and shouting and clearly delighted by all the chaos, and disembarked at a lower floor, went down the hallway and into Lance’s other apartment. The furniture was haphazard, boxes everywhere, but at least there was a balcony instead of a death trap, which people immediately crowded out on to smoke.

The party continued. Two of the handful of women present, a taciturn pair who were clad in something approaching bondage gear (it was hard to judge from attire alone, but I thought they might actually have been call girls), broke out some cocaine in the bathroom, door hanging open, and somehow my radar guided me right to it. Paul, with equally bad habits we’d indulged in together

when partying after work at our old job, joined in too. That kept us awake and drinking, and motormouthing to the random people assorted.

It was in this state of impaired judgment that I revealed to Lance and Paul that I was, in fact, sick of my job and ready to quit. I was leading ongoing development on a large enterprise web application for a biotechnology firm in the agribusiness sector. It paid all right, but it was killing me. They’d built the application on .NET, which had made sense years ago, and then half-redid the thing in Ruby on Rails, but the guy who was redoing it left, then held the company hostage as a consultant. Now it was a patchwork of two competing infrastructures, awkwardly patched together. I wanted a clean slate, a fresh project.

A brand-new startup would be ideal: I didn’t want to inherit anybody’s code, which is to say, anybody’s insane, convoluted thought process I would have to decipher.

And of course (this part I did not say out loud or need to), there was always the dangling carrot of finally getting lucky at a new venture that actually took off. This was when online dating still meant using a web browser. Dating brokered by apps, entirely with your mobile device, was still a somewhat new idea. The idea had been proven in the gay world, with hookup apps like Grindr. But just a few short years ago, nobody knew yet if it could take off with straight people. I was skeptical, but it did seem to have potential, and Lance was convincing. Unshakable in his confidence there was money here: the kind of scalability, the huge user numbers he’d harnessed before. A fortune to be made.

Lance was astute enough to know that this was the moment at which to switch from pursuing me to letting me pursue him. When my interest started to betray me, he right away became cagey and noncommittal. But Paul was grinning the whole time, knowing that basically, it was a done deal. The thousand dollars was his.

* * *

My first day at Bangr was deceptively perfect, as often happens with jobs. You walk in the door with all your optimism intact, despite having been burned before. Since the technology was a clean slate, all I had to catch up on was the design process so far. Laura—a willowy white girl in her early twenties whom I judged to be from an

upper-middle-class background, modest and reserved in every respect aside from a giant neck tattoo of a slightly abstract Virgin Mary composed of tiny lines and dots—showed me how to use the espresso machine and got me set up with the company’s Google apps. Her official title was “operations manager” but she only managed herself, and hardly even that. I would soon see that she acted as an executive assistant for Lance.

In our first meetings, he was on his best behavior, his round blond head nodding agreeably, his unblinking black eyes with their almost-invisible blond lashes seeming to communicate placid, fixed concentration on a goal. When we weren’t in meetings, he was hunched in a state of hypnosis at his computer, immersed in the glowing purity of data filling several terminal sessions on his dual-screen acreage. My third day there I happened to drop a steel canteen while walking past his desk, approaching from behind, and was impressed to see that bald pate of his—golden hair swirling around a sphere of naked flesh—did not budge a millimeter.

I first saw signs of pressure on Jim, the user experience and visual designer, a tall Yankee from Rhode Island with a luxuriant blond beard and high boots. He seemed rushed and anxious, and I wasn’t sure why, since it seemed like he was smart, talented, and doing his job well. My first weeks, I spent a lot of time with Jim, meeting often to go through his wireframes for the app, envisioning user flows and interactions and states of the application. He’d already mapped everything out in painstaking detail with Lance, which made my job a lot easier.

Then, in a series of meetings between myself, Lance, and Jim, I started noticing all the little things Lance would say to Jim like, “Are you sure that creates the right affordance for the user?” or “You’re adding in an extra transitional state” or “Make it simpler” or “This is oversimplified, we’re missing some UI.” None of them taken in isolation was unreasonable. Only after going to enough of these meetings in succession did I realize why Jim’s cool exterior was slowly falling apart. He’d follow Lance’s suggestions to the letter, only to find that in a following meeting, Lance would, having forgotten his prior feedback, deliver the opposite critique. He was impervious to logic when Jim would gently remind him that the original design had actually been what Lance was now suggesting. Lance would

simply respond with “Give me something new that solves both problems” and leave it up to Jim to interpret, even (especially) if this made absolutely no sense.

The office itself contributed to the feeling of anxiety. It was not large (with only five employees, it did not need to be), but it was of course airy and postindustrial, with a wall of exposed brick and high ceilings, at a chic location in the Leather District. The problem was with the open-office layout, ubiquitous at tech companies, and at Bangr arranged so that Lance could see everyone’s screen from either behind or the side. Soon when Jim and I were getting lunch at a nearby taqueria, he grumbled about it, saying it made it difficult for him to “get in the zone” knowing that Lance could be scrutinizing every pixel, questioning every move he made. I was not in the habit of spending lots of time on social media anyway, but I curbed myself from logging into Facebook or Twitter at all during the day.

Early on Wednesday of my second week, I was deep in research on the JavaScript platform I was planning to use to build the app, when Lance appeared at my shoulder.

“Why aren’t you coding?”

I turned to face him. “What?”

“Why aren’t you coding yet?” Everyone turned to face us.

“Do you want to have a meeting to discuss timeline,” I said, “and the process of how we’re going to implement?”

“Look—I trust you to work your magic, I’m just seriously confused by why you’re not coding yet.” Everyone was listening. I took a deep breath. I was now going to have to defend myself.

“Lance, you could have hired some kid straight out of a coding boot camp. They’d be writing code the first day. No research, just using whatever’s trendy. Then, three months in—implementation hits a wall no one predicted. You hired me because I’ve built half a dozen applications before. You want to meet and talk it over in more depth, set up project milestones, let’s do it. You want stand-ups, sprints, let’s do it.

“This is my process. I start with research, I don’t just dive in without looking down.”

Lance reddened; for a long moment he seemed about to explode. Then, like an internal circuit breaker had been hit, he calmed; the tension and color drained out of his face.

“Okay. But I’m gonna hold you to that,” he said, and pointed at me. I hate being pointed at.

“Three months from now we’re gonna be flying down the highway. No surprises. No delays.” Sure enough, this was going to be another terrible startup experience.

* * *

That night I went out for tacos then drinks with Jim in the Mission and we commiserated in the dark comfort of a bar hunched over gin gimlets. We talked about quitting simultaneously, which would really fuck Lance over. But things hadn’t gotten bad enough yet for us to follow through; we were just talking.

“Laura’s going to quit, I’m sure of it,” Jim said.

“I don’t blame her.”

“It’s worse than you know.”

“Let me guess. He’s sexually harassing her?”

“Not in a way that’s easy to nail down in a legal sense. There’s definitely that vibe though.”

“She told you?”

“Yeah, we talk, we were hired at the same time. Eons ago, at the dawn of the company history—what, six months now? Lance still doesn’t know anything about her, but he’s obsessed with micromanaging her and getting her to constantly acknowledge him. She says he’s always checking her out.”

“Can’t completely blame him for looking,” I said, “not to say it’s all right to be a creep.”

“She’s very good-looking, obviously,” Jim said. “The thing that’s funny? He hired her because of that tattoo, assuming she was the kind of girl that in his mind is the target audience for the app.”

Jim sipped his gin, grinning as he went on.

“Laura’s a former heroin addict in drug recovery. She’s on this heavy Catholic mysticism trip. Goes to Mass, fasts during Lent, reads about the saints. She has a giant tattoo of Saint Teresa on her arm, as well as that Virgin on her neck. Never drinks, never smokes. She’s vegan, practices yoga and Zen meditation. If it isn’t clear yet: She’d never use Bangr in a million years.”

“That’s pretty funny. Lance really doesn’t have a clue?”

“Head way too deep up his ass.”

“Wonder why she took the job?”

“Well, why did you take the job? Do you endorse this ridiculous product we’re making?”

“Of course not.”

“Well—there you have it. We’re hypocrites, all of us—except for Lance, that’s one thing you can say for him. He’s building a product he believes in, and that he would himself use, that fits into the life he wants for himself and that’s compatible with the world he wants to live in. The rest of us are just in it to pay the rent.”

We then complained about San Francisco rent and the housing crisis for at least an hour, before the conversation took an even darker turn. The housing situation had gotten so bad that tent cities had started appearing in several very visible corners of San Francisco, interstices of the concrete jungle, most notably under a freeway maze where the 80 and the 101 came together. Jim and I swapped stories about evictions we’d heard of and encounters with the homeless. Just the past week, I’d seen a homeless immigrant man sitting stunned on the sidewalk on Capp Street, his shoes off and his feet covered in blood, and when I stopped to ask him if he was all right, he broke down crying.

* * *

Jim and I never quit in a coordinated “fuck you” because the following week, he was fired. The way it was handled, I started to see more clearly the streak of sadism in Lance’s character. He waited until the office was full on Monday, sitting with a look of grim death on his face, and when Jim happened to walk by his desk, said to him sharply, “Jim, we need to meet tomorrow afternoon.”

“Sure,” Jim said, and paused. “What about?”

“We’ll discuss it then,” Lance said and turned back to his screens.

“Okay,” Jim said and started to walk away, then stopped, remembering something. “Does that mean we’re not having our regular design check-in today?”

Lance spoke as if a small child were interrupting his important, grown-up work. “Correct,” he said.

“All right. So—when tomorrow?”

“Just keep your afternoon free. Laura will book the meeting.”

As Jim went and filled his coffee cup, and returned to his desk, there was silence in the office. Patrick, the junior JavaScript developer whom I was going to train, looked uneasy, and Samir, director of product marketing, did as well. Ken, the social media and graphics guy who worked part-time for Samir, was also in the office. Laura

was in another world, wearing her headphones, typing furiously.

Later that morning, a young woman came in for a meeting with Lance, and it was obvious to all that she was Jim’s replacement: Her outfit included white, heavy-rimmed glasses, white-painted fingernails, and a white Apple Watch—which at the time was still a big statement. Lance’s whole demeanor changed when she entered; he greeted her warmly and escorted her to the conference room. No explanation was offered for her presence, but none was needed. Jim took a long lunch and everyone wondered if he’d come back. When he came back in, I smelled the sour perfume of expensive, hop-infused beer. But he stayed late that day, possibly preparing things for the premature departure he now anticipated.

The following day, Jim asked me if I wanted to grab lunch and I declined, fearing contamination. It had been decided that he was a failure and was going to be expelled from our tiny tribe. In the coming months, Jim would be our scapegoat for everything that was wrong with the product, so my social closeness to him up to this point was already cause for concern. I knew he’d forgive me, I already knew how this kind of thing went. Needing closure after the firing took place, he’d reach out and we’d go get drinks and conspire. I’d continue to be his man on the inside, telling him what a shitshow it was, which would make him feel better, boost his confidence as he found a new job.

At four in the afternoon, Jim went into the meeting where he would be axed like a man on his way to an execution: doomed, depressed, but with a glint of defiance. Lance, on the other hand, beamed with a latent aggression that evinced something beyond his usual supreme self-regard. He had the air of a man at a cantina about to go upstairs with a prostitute: slightly ashamed of himself, but mostly just greedy for what he was about to enjoy.

* * *

The new designer’s name was Paula. Though she was fresh out of design school and had never worked on a real product before, she was impressively oblivious in her blind confidence. She seemed, at first, like a perfect match for Lance. Not in the sense that they’d get along, but that they were perfect opponents, each the center of their own universe, strongly centered in their views to the point where neither

would be able to get the other to budge, and therefore compromise would be the only possible result: compromise that neither of them would recognize as such, that each of them would think was entirely their own vision.

That's how it seemed it would go, at least for the first week. Paula declared that she was scrapping Jim's work and starting over, which troubled Patrick and myself, but we didn't end up having anything to worry about. The design process was actually at a standstill. Paula challenged and contradicted virtually everything Lance said during the daily stand-ups that had recently been instituted, which Lance responded to (and to be fair, had instigated) by questioning her every decision and opinion. She was a born bullshitter, but had some strong and interesting views about product design. She was big on "empathy for the user," which despite being nice and buzzworthy, was off-putting to Lance. The word itself—*empathy*—made him wince, and he couldn't himself use it without air quotes.

After just two weeks of this, everyone felt somewhat exhausted, but it nonetheless came as a shock and was felt as a collective insult when Paula quit without notice. She was there one day, making big plans, and then the next she was gone. I saw on her LinkedIn that she had accepted another job. Following a link to her Twitter, she was talking excitedly about the company she had joined (called Ideation, an established firm and not a startup), and I noted that looking back on her stream, she had never mentioned Bangr, even obliquely.

I immediately texted Jim, knowing he'd be ecstatic. Though we'd all continue to scapegoat him, the demoralizing impact of Paula's departure would send us running back to his designs as our only compass for the product. His work growing in importance like that, after he'd been banished so pointlessly, would have a corrosive effect on company morale far beyond anything Jim could have intentionally done to sabotage the project on his way out. Put another way: Stupid decisions take on a life of their own.

* * *

The day Paula quit, everyone left early, Lance first of all, which was very uncharacteristic. I hung out and shut the place down, catching up on some prototypes I was making. It started to get dark. Before I left, I stood by Paula's/

Jim's old desk and stared at the big corkboard covered with colorful paper rectangles: All the wireframes for the app so far were there, printed out and neatly tacked up. All the screens in the app we'd envisioned. Immersed in the technical and design details as I was, it had been weeks since I'd given much thought to the reality of what the thing we were busy inventing was intended for: Connecting anonymous strangers so they could have casual sex.

At eight, I left the office, turning the lights off and locking up as I went out. I started walking up Folsom Street toward the Mission District in the cool twilight, the fresh sea air laden with a fine mist that spun around the streetlights. I walked by the giant picture windows of a crowded upscale bar with dangling filament bulbs illuminating a fashionable crowd of cosmopolitan hipsters, straight and gay, young and old. The atmosphere inside was convivial, and it seemed, to my lingering gaze as I walked past, that there was not a single alone or lonesome or maladjusted person inside. Everyone was happy, sociable, and there with friends or a date.

I was approaching my thirtieth birthday and plagued by a nagging feeling of life crisis. I'd worked on six apps in a row, for six startups, over six years. I'd survived at one place for nearly half that time, another for a year and a half, and the rest were aborted misadventures of a series of weeks or months, of the kind Bangr was shaping up to be. I hadn't struck it rich, I hadn't hit a "big IPO" or been part of an "acqui-hire"—each startup had flopped or struggled along after my departure. I was well paid, but my salary was it, aside from equity in the company, which was almost certainly worthless. I had started my career as a developer in thrall to the magic of technology and for a long time had thrown myself with total abandon into programming. It was my identity: I was a hacker, so I accepted being glued to my computer at nearly every waking moment.

The pace hadn't slackened. I still routinely pulled sixty-hour weeks, and every place I worked had some brand-new technology requirements to master. The industry, constantly changing, demanded more hours from you than you could spare. I had few friends, all formerly people I worked with, all equally busy—too busy, really, to have a meaningful friendship. I rarely met girls and even more rarely went on dates, which almost always ended up falling flat.

I was starting to give up on the idea that I'd find someone. My conversational skills were atrophied, as was my knowledge of politics, art, or literature beyond the science fiction novels that had filled my childhood. I was never going to appeal to the women that appealed to me, women that weren't interested in tech, that in the politics of the gentrifying Bay Area were usually against the whole sector on principle. It had been over a year since I'd had sex, and I felt terribly pent-up. The longer I went without it, the further the prospect of a new affair retreated from my horizon.

I kept walking, crossed under the freeway overpass where, farther down, there was the tent city of homeless people. Then past Rainbow Grocery, where I stopped and got a seven-dollar microbrewed, small-batch kombucha with "elderflower lemon ginger" flavoring. I always blew money on things like this when I felt depressed. The previous Sunday I'd spent over a hundred bucks getting my face shaved and hair trimmed, going in for the full-retro experience with a hot towel and straight razor. I didn't even need the haircut. On further reflection, I realized I had just craved the tactile thrill of a blade held to my throat.

I wandered the Mission District, restless, wired on anxiety. Looking for something, but I didn't know what. Up 16th to Capp, then down to 20th, then up to Mission Street, then down until 23rd. Past the boutique restaurants filled with white tech people like me, who were quickly displacing all the rest: the Chinese stores selling cheap clothes to Latino immigrants, the little groceries with tables full of mangos, the cell phone shops, the taquerias emitting rich smells of cooking, and the *joyerías* with dangling crosses, chains of gold, and medallions of the saints. On the corner of Mission and 23rd I watched the happy, wholesomely cool, twenty-something young people out with friends having fun and felt that I'd missed out on all of that, missed out on it all. Aside from frenetic, pathetic partying I'd wedged in here and there, I'd actually blown my twenties working. Coding, night and day, alone in the pale glow of a computer screen. Drugs, more often than not, for me had simply fueled more work.

For the first time, I admitted to myself that I might actually use the app. I'd been lying to myself as well as Jim, thinking and saying I was above it: I wanted Bangr.

I was squarely in the target demographic; the "use case" was me. I needed to score, if only to break the spell of loneliness and wash the smell of desperation off. If things kept on going this way, I'd break down and, for the first time in my life, hire a prostitute. It occurred to me that on a date initiated through an app I had myself built, announcing I was a developer would take on a different light. It would almost be like meeting someone at a nightclub and casually revealing that you were the nightclub owner.

There could even be ways I could tweak the algorithm to treat myself to better matches. After all, I would have godlike access to user data. It would be trivial to identify frequent users of the app, see the kinds of matches they made, and subtly game the system to tilt things in my favor. Success wouldn't be guaranteed, but I could ensure a steady stream of the best matches. This realization both excited and troubled me, and I immediately suspected that Lance had been thinking of it all along. Then I considered something that actually scared me: Lance, or I, would be able to peer into the activities of any girl who dated us, write down the content of any messages they sent or received. That was a power I didn't want, and I promised myself to never make use of it.

* * *

Despite my lingering ambivalence, I decided to double down on my efforts to build the app quickly. I pushed Patrick, our junior developer, to work late and stayed right in the trenches with him. It was fun, in a way, ordering pizza and coding into the night, sprinting through one feature after another, pushing ourselves to the limits of mental endurance. For me, it was a familiar dip into high-gear mode, for Patrick it had the sparkle of something new. Lance was delighted by this display of effort. He humored us in every way, giving me a credit card to put food on and, when I requested it, buying comfy sleeping mats so the developers had a place to camp out. A few weeks into this, late at night eating chow fun out of boxes, I was about to let my guard down.

"It's not for Lance, all of this, you know that right?" A foolish grin slowly spread over Patrick's face.

"You think this has a chance of blowing up. We're gonna hit pay dirt!"

I paused, then nodded. I realized it was a bad idea to tell Patrick I was now a believer in the software's power to get losers like us laid. Better to let him think we were all about to get filthy rich.

* * *

Six weeks later, a lean first version of the app—barely more than a working prototype, but we'd clean up the rough edges with our next release—was ready. Lance was going to submit it to the App Store. We were all worried that Cupertino would reject it based on the sleazy premise. Samir, the resident expert at spin, had labored over the marketing language. He said, "We can't afford to have this product look like a result of perceived Silicon Valley bro culture, something for guys to use in sexual conquests." I noted that Lance did not flinch or react to any of this type of language during these discussions. He took it as a given that there would be moral objections to his creation, which had to be strategically neutralized.

The solution for Samir had appeared in careful, feminism-informed (or at least, feminism-aware), almost therapeutic language positioning Bangr as a "sex-positive" app for "consensual partners of any gender expression and sexual orientation," and so on. He developed a series of talking points for us. We would need to make the product appear not only defensible, but actually progressive, even socially enlightened. Samir developed two-word clouds, ones to avoid and ones to use. The words to avoid included *hookup*, *promiscuity*, and *prostitute*, as well as, oddly, the word *love* itself, and with a touch of high absurdity, the words *bang* or *banging* in reference to intercourse. Words that were approved for use were much more profuse and included *freedom*, *fun*, *choice*, *modern*, *partners*, *millennials*, and *matchmaking*, and in cases where we might be called on to discuss the issue (which should be avoided), *escort* or *sex worker*.

There was a talking point prepared: Using Bangr for paid sex work was a violation of the terms of service and could result in you being banned from using the app. If pressed further, we would say that we would rely on a system we'd built into the app where parties could issue complaints against another user, including complaints of any kind of harassment or unwanted advances, which were also strictly forbidden according to the terms of service. And we

were to emphasize that although we took pains to include these measures, all our service was doing was facilitating communication, like an email or text messaging service, and similarly, we were not responsible in the least for any of the content or consequences of what users did with that communication. We were simply empowering our users, opening new fields of experience to them; that was our humble mission and only goal.

* * *

The day that Bangr was submitted to the Apple App Store, Lance popped a bottle of champagne. It was a moment. It was impossible not to feel like we'd run a marathon and our own stamina and endurance were what we were all privately celebrating. We gathered in the break area by the gleaming espresso machine, and Lance shone with triumph. We raised our plastic cups, and our fearless leader gave a toast.

"Here's to our success. To the vision it took to get us here. The long days that made it possible . . ."

He went on in this banal vein for a while. I had to remind myself—and Patrick, whom I went out for beers with afterward—that the battle was hardly won and that really, the toast was premature. Patrick was a clearheaded young atheist from Mormon country and had proved himself a sturdy work partner; I was his technical mentor and felt a responsibility to let him know. In the crowded dark of a sports bar on Market Street, jostled by Giants fans, I took him by the arm.

"You've got to understand this, dude. Apps can languish for months waiting for approval by the chiefs in Cupertino. And if they reject it, there's no court of appeals. You have to change things, resubmit, and wait again."

Patrick shrugged this off.

"How could they say no, when Cruizer is in the App Store?"

He was simply repeating Lance's mantra. Since Cruizer—the hookup app that had inspired Bangr, that we had in fact ripped off, but which was marketed toward, and popular with, gay men almost exclusively—was approved, how could Bangr not be?

I was not so sanguine.

* * *

HILARY BAKER

Outpost, 2014
Acrylic on canvas, 54 x 72 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST PHOTO CREDIT: BRIAN FORREST

HILARY BAKER

Wall, 2013
Acrylic on canvas, 40 x 30 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST
PHOTO CREDIT: BRIAN FORREST

As the wait began, Laura quit, as if she'd been waiting for this moment to do it. She didn't want to be part of Bangr as a thing in the world thousands of people could know about, something written up in *TechCrunch* and debated on the blogs. That was no surprise to me, but Lance was shocked, wounded, stalking around the office having a tantrum for days. He got over it though, blowing off steam by channeling his rage and sense of powerlessness into the remaining staff. I observed that his hire for Laura's replacement was, in a certain sense, a more astute business decision: Tom, a young, fashionable gay man with a sharp grasp of details, had firsthand user experience of the popular gay hookup apps. This did, however, leave our team entirely male.

As the wait hit the two-week mark, things started to deteriorate. Lance was being increasingly unreasonable, trying to control all the things he could, with everything hanging on the one thing he couldn't. I recall one meeting where he told Samir to "Get us a social following now. End of story."

"But we don't have a product yet!" Samir objected. "I can only get people so excited about a product that will exist in the future, only find so many ways to talk about it."

"I don't care how you do it, I want to see numbers. I don't want our Twitter and Facebook to have pitiful amounts of likes on the day we appear in the App Store!"

"If all you care about is quantity, not quality, you know I can just buy us a bunch of Twitter followers." Lance didn't skip a beat.

"Do it! I'll give you the budget. Pay some black hat some fucking bitcoin and get it moving. I don't care if they're bots, I need to see those numbers."

Samir laughed out loud. All of us were taken aback, but Lance was oblivious. His blue eyes were pinwheels of focus.

"Better yet," he said, "go further. Look into some more guerrilla tactics. Other kinds of social media manipulation, like defensive strategies. Ideally we should have what looks like a grassroots following, with Twitter accounts we control, so in the event that people start to tear down our brand on social media, we can counterattack without looking like the company is doing it."

"Sock puppets?" Samir said.

"More like an army of sock puppets," Lance said, then without looking my way, said, "Have Jason help you if there's programming needed."

As the staff meeting adjourned, Lance marched out first and the rest of us shot each other looks of utter disbelief.

* * *

Ethically questionable though it was, creating an army of Twitter zombies we controlled was a task that appealed to the hacker in me. Plus it gave Samir and me a chance to work together, which meant we were soon pairing up to venture out of the office for lunch meetings or stand around vaping e-cigarettes on Folsom Street, conspiring to jointly quit and "really fuck Lance over" in more or less an exact replay of my working relationship with Jim. Which both of us were aware of; we joked about who would be fired first. I could code, which made me a valuable commodity, but now that Patrick was doing well and knew the codebase, and the app was in beta, I was far from safe from the axe if I enraged our young dictator.

Neither one of us would be fired. Our doom, or liberation, was soon delivered in the form of an article on *TechCrunch* that Tom found.

"Hey, Lance," he said one Tuesday morning around eleven. "You'll want to come over and take a look at this."

A few minutes later we all were hunched over his screen reading the article in silence. It was about an app called Down to Hook Up, which had been spreading like wildfire for the past week. And it was the exact app we were building.

Lance turned and walked to his desk. He picked his hoodie off the back of his chair, put it on, closed his laptop and slid it into his shoulder bag, and left without saying another word. He didn't bother to mumble something about salvaging the situation. We all knew him well enough to understand that in his worldview you were either first, or you were nothing. It was over.

* * *

In fact, Down to Hook Up was not only first, it was better. It did not merely connect you to random people with the visual browsing, tactile controls, and double-opt-in already in vogue in the gay scene; it offered a nice suite of privacy

features and slick, discreet integration with Facebook, which it would communicate with for notifications and to try to find you matches, without publishing embarrassing information. So it really was over for Bangr: completely over, there was no salvaging it.

I, of course, immediately downloaded Down to Hook Up and tried it out. It was only an experiment, I told myself, and I needed to see what my competitors had done to approach the exact same problems I had been laboring for months to solve. I “swiped up” several times, then several more, soon more than an hour disappearing into endless browsing. I was overwhelmed by the selection. I took a shower and cleaned my apartment as if I were expecting a visitor. I had a beer, then another. I wasn’t sure what I would do if I got a response. I didn’t need to worry, because the first week, I got none.

Meanwhile, I turned to scouring the Internet for news about Down to Hook Up. There were some scathing responses, even from the “bro” culture itself—one men’s magazine wrote, in its characteristically stupid tone, “Whatever happened to the good old days, when hooking up with an acquaintance required, at the very least, some cheap whiskey and a modicum of charm?” It went on: “This thing is already a hit with lazy, sex-starved twenty-somethings who spend their lives on Facebook; the app’s creators claim to be registering new users at the rate of five per minute.” The instant nostalgia was only one side, however, because immediately visible at the other end were forums mushrooming with complaints from loser guys that the app was far from miraculous and had failed utterly at turning their prospects around, leaving them more hopeless than before.

I felt myself spiraling downward. The whole thing was a farce. But it was still far from what one headline called it: “The Worst Thing in the World.” It was just one more human behavior that had become digitized, one of a long list from love to war to entertainment. Sooner or later, we’d find a way to disrupt the dental floss market, or revolutionize pet boarding. Nothing was safe. I, and the army of other techies like me, were on the move, and with a sense of inevitability, the world’s people resigned themselves to one erosion after another: of privacy, mystery, space, silence, decency. Because the new vistas of possibility unlocked by instantaneous communication and software

were irresistible—and because once everyone else had adapted, who could stand to be left behind?

* * *

A year later, I wandered into the bar that used to be the Attic on 24th Street and at first thought I’d confused the location. The dark wood and vinyl booths had been scoured away, and in their place were polished concrete and steel. Vast TVs silently blared sports where nothing but bottles used to gleam.

In a daze, I ordered a drink and sat down. Outside, it was just getting dark. I thought about the changes San Francisco was going through, which this bar encapsulated succinctly. I turned and noted the bar was filling up, which made it seem a little less bleak and stupid. Then I saw a familiar face appear. It was Jim—still bearded, still pale. I bought him a drink, feeling guilty remembering the shit I’d talked about him and his work after he left—was fired from—the company. But that was long ago.

“What an irony that I would see you here,” he said.

“Why?”

“I came here for a Tinder date and they’re a no-show.”

We laughed and I threw an arm around his shoulder. I was already wasted. “I’ll be your date, buddy,” I said. “Let’s bang.”

We had gin gimlets like we used to order and talked about our new jobs, the changing city, politics.

Then Jim brought up Lance.

“Did you hear about what happened at his new company?” he said.

“I have no idea what he’s doing now.”

“I have a friend who worked at his next startup. You’ve got to hear about this.”

After the demise of Bangr, Lance had turned his attention to an extreme sports startup called LiveEye.

It was a premium channel for ultra-high-definition footage shot from the perspective of “professional” extreme sportspeople: especially the lunatic wingsuited BASE jumpers as they plummeted off cliffs, off buildings, and out of helicopters.

The story went like this: Lance had gotten some funding in Europe and had a live demo of a BASE jump in the Alps transmitted by live feed to a presentation before investors in London. It was also broadcast on the LiveEye

app and website. It was not the first time he’d done presentations this way, but it was the biggest so far.

At first, all went spectacularly well: the feed came through, crystalline and sharp. The veteran BASE jumper whom LiveEye had sponsored, Ludwig Kurz, with more than a thousand jumps to his name, soared off the sheer face of Mount Gitschen, first diving straight down, then as his wingsuit extended, pulling away from the granite face to deliver a first-person view of his flight toward the green valleys below. The experience of watching the feed, Jim had been told, was quite impressive, and the investors were mesmerized.

Then, when heading toward a foothill with a dramatic craggy arch formation, it became clear that Ludwig was going to soar through the eye of the arch. Everyone leaned forward in their seats, with mounting tension as the towering stone loomed closer—and closer. The hill raced up, Ludwig and his camera coming extremely close to the top of the arch, as the pastoral landscape of the green valley on the other side beckoned far below. And then the feed cut violently, and the video ended.

Justin J. Allen was born in Bakersfield, California in 1979. He earned a B.A. in English at San Francisco State University, and has worked as an editor, designer, and technologist for arts, activist, and news organizations. His writing has appeared in *Fiddleblack*, *Transfer*, *The Sacramento News & Review*, and other publications.