A VERDICT IN THE THAMES FOG: WHEN THE BLOCK UNIVERSE CRUSHED THE JAR OF MỨT CÓC

The Final Sitting at St. James's Palace — An Eternal Account by Lady Whistledown

"Dearest Void,

This week my quill was dipped not in perfumed ink but straight into acid. London has just witnessed a farce of earth-shaking proportions: my long-lost adopted son — Tony Whistledown, who by day files the nails of middle-aged ladies in the Texas desert and by night burns the lamp over nine hundred linear

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programs — has dragged an entire empire of ethics from the banks of the Thames before the throne of Queen Charlotte.

One party speaks in the name of humanity's transparency, yet its heart is as hollow as a cut-off relay; the other wears the name of an outlaw beyond the academy, yet is at bottom an addict of martyrdom. And this is how the Queen taught them both the meaning of the cruelty of the Most High..."

— LADY WHISTLEDOWN'S SOCIETY PAPERS

ACT I: THE CLOCK STRIKES MINUTE EIGHT, AND A LETTER OF ZERO BITS

The November fog of London came down very slowly, thick and cold as the ashes of a furnace gone out. It crept up from the sodden surface of the Thames, crawled

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over the mossy brick walls of the institutes, and slipped through the tall arched windows of St. James's Palace.

In the solemn marble hall, time seemed to stand still. The yellowed light of dusk fell through curtains of deep red velvet, scattering glittering motes over the Queen's four-tiered wig, studded with diamonds and grey pearls.

The silence was eerie. There was only the steady, faint breathing of a snow-white Pomeranian dozing on a gold-embroidered silk cushion at the foot of the throne.

In the middle of the hall, two figures knelt, motionless:

On the left, the Chief Secretary of the London Journal of Ethics — envoy of the supreme institution appointed to guard the conscience of artificial intelligence the world over. He wore a gleaming black tailcoat and a square lace cravat without a

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single crease; an academic medal shone on his chest, and he clutched a leather case embossed with the crest of a mighty publishing empire.

On the right, Tony Whistledown — the hem of his sweater still reeking of the acetone of a nail salon in Big Spring. Tucked in at his back was half a jar of mứt cóc wrapped in wax paper (candied ambarella; spoken with a pause, a Vietnamese minced oath); in his fist, thirteen pages of manuscript thick with nine hundred linear programs and fifty-six probability fractions.

Queen Charlotte reclined on her throne with an aristocratic languor bordering on cruelty. She unhurriedly opened a gold box inlaid with mother-of-pearl, took a pinch of snuff between two long slender fingers, and drew it deep into her nose. A thin herbal wisp escaped her haughty nostrils. The ivory fan in her hand swayed, beat by beat, slow as the pendulum of an old clock counting the meaningless crumbs of the mortal world:

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— "Read it to Us," the Queen said, her voice soft and smooth as velvet snow. "What is this splendid document that the temple of ethics on the Thames has just bestowed upon a living human being?"

A court clerk stepped trembling out of the shadows, knelt, and unrolled the writ:

— "Your Majesty, it is a letter of refusal bearing the universal hash 20411b79-ed9c-4c1d-81a4-7f49fdd82efc. It appeared at eight minutes past eleven at night, Texas time, which is to say five in the morning in London, before the capital had even put the kettle on, after the plaintiff's manuscript had been held for thirty-six hours in a black box. Its text opens with a courteous sigh: 'Regrettably'. Not one line of analysis. Not one word of reason. By the theory of Sir Shannon, its mutual information of explanation measures precisely zero bits. Attached is a limp link pointing to the door of a neighbouring journal."

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The ivory fan stopped in mid-air. Charlotte's smoke-coloured eyes slid down to the Chief Secretary, and the corner of her mouth lifted into an icy smile:

— "Well. Regrettably. What a fragrant, genteel new word! You sit in rooms warmed by academic renown and write upon your aims and scope words as radiant as scripture: 'interpretability and explainability as ethical imperatives', 'accountability when model behavior is emergent or opaque', 'meaningful human oversight, not merely nominal human involvement'!

And yet when a human being brings the work of his mind to knock at your temple, that black box needs only thirty-six hours to swallow thirteen pages whole and spit out a pre-printed receipt like the till at a laundromat! Bernard Williams taught us of the regret of the one whose hands did the regrettable thing. And you? You put your real signature beneath a regret drafted last year — an ownerless regret, addressed to everyone ever pushed to the margins!

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You preach to the world that a person must never be treated merely as a tool, yet you stamp a string of hash on their foreheads. You teach machines to become human, while you yourselves labour diligently to become an automatic cut-off relay! One click, thirty seconds to tick one box of minimal reason — 'Out of scope' or 'Resubmission policy' — and even that you begrudge! Is it that you fear that once you explain, the mask of ethics will slip and show the rot beneath?"

The Chief Secretary struck his forehead against the stone floor, sweat pouring down:

— "Mercy, Your Supreme Majesty! Consider the plight of the editorial board! Every week we receive thousands of manuscripts. On the first of November this very outlaw was told his prose read like a machine's. Unreconciled, he took it upon himself to resubmit on the same subject without any invitation! He brought nine hundred linear programs and fifty-six probability fractions to challenge the 0.1%

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of distinguished professors published in our very own journal! A desk rejection is a legitimate screening procedure!"

ACT II: THE ROYAL THUNDERBOLT AND THE INTELLECTUAL TRAP

Hearing this, Tony Whistledown on the opposite dais curled his lip. He raised his head, his jaw jutting with the smugness of a man who has just borrowed royal authority to flatten those who scorned him. He straightened his hem, leafed through his notes, and made ready to recite chapter thirty-eight of the *Tao Te Ching* to finish the bout.

And at that very peak of self-satisfaction—

CRACK!

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The ivory fan in Queen Charlotte's hand snapped shut and came down like a thunderbolt on the marble table!

The blow exploded through the hall, rolling like thunder tearing a velvet curtain in two! The Pomeranian leapt up with a start, gave one shrill bark, and fled tail-down behind the leg of the throne.

Charlotte rose from the throne!

The heavy ball gown of gold-threaded brocade shook with every furious, pounding step. The Queen bore straight down the steps, the fan in her hand levelled at the bridge of Tony's nose! The fury long held beneath royal silk and velvet burst out all at once, harsh and relentless as a firestorm blasting the face of the insolent:

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— "What are you smirking at, you arrogant nail-filer from Texas?! Do you think We are blind to your petty tricks?!"

The whole hall shook. The smile on Tony's lips froze on the instant. The blood in his veins seemed to set.

— "Did you think We would not recognise that venomous voice, poison steeped into every letter? So you are the adopted son that the mysterious Lady Whistledown has hidden all these years! A rotten bloodline indeed! The mother uses her quill to spy on the bedchambers of Mayfair's nobility; the son hauls probability matrices to London to set traps for academicians!

You chant Laozi like a sutra, you hold up Shannon as a shield, you play the poor innocent quail egg rolling itself into the furnace! But look Us in the eye and answer: why did you stay awake two nights building nine hundred linear programs

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and forty-six checks? To serve science? No! You raised an impregnable fortress of mathematics for the sole purpose of silencing anyone who dares object!

You knew the academic rules perfectly well: a paper rejected on the first of November, resubmitted before the ink was dry and without invitation, will be beheaded at once by the administrative guillotine! You knew they would refuse! And still you submitted, then sat waiting for their receipt-printer to spit out its slip, as if to catch it in the act! Why?

Because in the depths of the arrogant, diseased ego of the Whistledown line: you craved that silent rejection letter more than anything on this earth!"

Tony staggered back half a step, beads of sweat drenching his brow, his ears ringing under the Sovereign's piercing cry:

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— "Had they kindly sent you a three-page letter of explanation, had a good-hearted editor spent ten minutes pointing out one small error, your bitter satire would have died in the egg! What pretext would you have had to write 'The Ethical Gatekeeper Paradox'? By what right would you call people 'a jar of mứt cóc'?

You laid out Seven Conspiracy Theories, from academic protection rackets to sniffer AIs, only for your own mathematics to slap you in the face with the truth that the real reason was merely 'Out of scope' and 'Resubmission policy'! You play a dirty juggling game: you smear your opponent's honour with insinuation while canonising your own objectivity!

You say you want to cút — to get lost — home to your hose, your garden and your dogs, but in truth you are standing in the middle of a London crossroads shouting for all the world to hear: 'Look at me, nobly turning my back on the hypocrites!'

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You are no persecuted quail egg! You are the one who basted himself in butter, climbed into the frying pan, and now sizzles and wails for pity before the Crown!"

Charlotte's roar brought the mathematician's swagger crashing down entirely. The whole council chamber held its breath, waiting for the royal sword to fall.

But then…

The fury stopped. Suddenly. Stone cold.

ACT III: THE FROZEN BLOCK UNIVERSE AND THE ABSOLUTE KNOCKOUT

Queen Charlotte shouted no more. She did not glare.

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She let out a very soft sigh. The storm receded as fast as a tide, leaving a beach desolate, bare and bitterly cold.

Charlotte turned without haste, her silk train sweeping slowly over the red carpet as she walked, step by weary step, back to her throne. Her face was as still as a winter lake frozen over. Her eyes did not seek the Secretary, nor did she deign to glance at the nail-filer.

She raised her gaze to the lofty vault of St. James's Palace, where plaster angels have spread their wings in eternal stillness for hundreds of years:

— "And yet… We wonder: what does all this thrashing of yours amount to, before the structure of reality?"

Charlotte's voice rose, halting, without feeling, even as hoarfrost falling on stone:

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— "Have you ever heard of the Block Universe? The four-dimensional 4D block of spacetime, frozen for eternity, in which past, present and future all exist at once like an unchanging crystal?"

The Chief Secretary looked up, bewildered. Tony Whistledown stood stunned, his manuscript frozen in mid-air.

Charlotte's gaze swept coldly over Tony's matrix-scrawled notes:

— "You, the nail-filer who calls himself a mathematician! You take pride in Lemma 1 and Lemma 2, in the mutual information $I(Q; X \mid R, S) = 0$ and Shannon's uncertainty $H(S)$! You built nine hundred linear programs and fifty-six probability fractions... But, deluded little quail, all your probability matrices are nothing but the product of epistemic ignorance!

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Probability is born only when a lowly creature is imprisoned in the one-way flow of time, not knowing what will happen in the next second! But in the Block Universe, time is a static slice! At the spacetime coordinate (x, y, z, t) of eight minutes past eleven on the night of 5 November, Texas time, the event of your paper being tossed in the bin has lain there, stone dead, since the first instant of the Big Bang!

There is no 0.1% probability. Nor is there any range from 0 to 6.5%! The true probabilities of the universe take only two values: 0 or 1! The rejection of your paper is a geometric event carved into the crystal of the cosmos billions of years ago. Your nine hundred linear programs prove no truth; they are only the desperate chirping of an ant trying to measure, with a ruler, the colossal block of ice that is crushing it!"

She turned to the Chief Secretary, her smile more venomous still:

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— "And you, black-robed priests of the Thames! You delude yourselves about 'institutional power'! You pride yourselves on your review procedures, your thirty-six-hour button, your gatekeeping power to decide the fate of a work!

Do you think yourselves God turning the wheel of history? In the four-dimensional Block Universe, your resplendent institution, your majestic journal on the Thames... is but a finite caterpillar streak, a brief carbon tube wriggling through spacetime before it crumbles into dust!

Your act of pressing the 'Regrettably' button is not power; it is a mechanical reflex at a predetermined coordinate! You guard no gate whatsoever. You are mindless specks of dust pinned in the grain of the cosmic crystal, pretending to have free will and institutional authority!"

Absolute silence fell over the hall.

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This time it was not the tense silence of a courtroom, but a total paralysis before a dizzying void.

Tony's mathematics collapsed: the probability fractions suddenly looked as naïve as a child's word puzzle. The authority of the Journal shattered: the crested leather case turned into a rotting wooden toy.

Before Charlotte's frozen Block Universe, where every event is settled and unchanging for all eternity, the war between thirteen pages and a thirty-six-hour template shrank into a meaningless grain of sand.

— "Do you see now?" Charlotte sighed, her voice as bitter as a north wind through the flesh. "No one wins here. No justice is done, because in this Block Universe everything simply... exists as it is.

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We shall not order you punished. We shall not make you eat mứt cóc. Nor shall We trouble to strip the journal of its medals. Take your thirteen meaningless pages and your silent templates out there. Let absolute oblivion swallow you whole."

She waved a brocade sleeve:

— "The court is dismissed. Out, all of you. The Thames is cold out there. The water still flows through London, past soulless machines, past academic rubbish heaps, and straight out to the open sea. This world… has never once cared whether a human being or an algorithm has just been turned away."

The two figures on the floor bowed their foreheads one last time, staggered to their feet, and backed step by step out of the throne room.

CLACK… THUNK.

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The heavy oak gate slammed shut. A dry bolt rang out, severing for good every tie with the Crown.

Outside, the London night had long since fallen. A winter wind gusted up from the Thames, stinging the face. Under yellow streetlamps flickering in the fog, the Chief Secretary clutched his silent leather case, while Tony Whistledown bowed his head and stuffed thirteen crumpled pages into his coat pocket.

Neither said a word to the other. Two lonely shadows turned in opposite directions into the deep night, letting the cold void of the Block Universe seep into the bottom of their hearts.

EPILOGUE: LADY WHISTLEDOWN CLOSES THE BOOK

"And so the velvet curtain has fallen on the most ironic tragedy under heaven!

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My wayward adopted son, with his nine hundred problems, believed himself the unmasker of the age, while the black-robed professors believed themselves the lords of conscience. But in the end Queen Charlotte used the very frost of the Block Universe to throw a bucket of cold water in both their faces: they were all just ants crawling on an eternal block of ice.

Yet the Queen forgot one small thing. The ant never claimed that the ice had a probability. It merely admitted, honestly, that it did not know, and went to measure whether what it believed was enough to justify a conclusion. To know that one does not know, said a barefoot old man of Athens, is the beginning of all wisdom. Whereas to stand on the summit of the ice and declare that one sees everything — that, Your Majesty, is a kind of confidence before which even mathematics doffs its hat… and quietly walks around.

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Tomorrow morning the capital will wake again to church bells, and the Thames will roll its black silt toward the distant ocean. In Texas, my adopted son will perhaps turn on the hose again to water the garden beside his silent dogs. And in London, the black-robed scholars will sit once more before their glaring screens, trembling and hesitating before they click a single word… 'Regrettably'.

But they and you both know: in the fourth dimension, that jar of mứt cóc has already been opened, and its sour tang will rise for all eternity.

Yours, from the shadows of Mayfair,

LADY WHISTLEDOWN

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