

## The Bureau

John looked left at the looming paper heap of his IN box, and the all-too-empty OUT circular bin on his right. He would have to start sometime. With a mental shrug, he pulled a folder at random from IN's middle.

The manilla sheath opened to reveal pages and pages of complete gibberish. It was an unending string of characters (at least it used his alphabet). Rather than pick another file out, he made himself busy with the one he had. It wasn't his fault if the self-important Bureau gave him nonsense. They were paying him enough for his time, not enough for his initiative.

John cross-referenced its label, and strained around to the tall shelves behind him. He yanked out the matching translation binder, all without needing to get out of his chair. It was a small victory. He laid the binder out beside the splayed beige folder, and started reading the translation guide:

Rule 1: Replace every vowel with its corresponding consonant.

Step A: Adjust page margins to ensure stability in case of high winds.

(SEE: Entry on SAFETY MARGINS)

Guideline a: Connect adjacent diphthongs to illustrate clear exit paths.

...

This made no sense. And what even was a diphthong? It was no use worrying about that yet, since "Rule 1" came first.

John set about marking out each a, e, i, o, and u. He'd always felt i's should be t's anyway. Dotted i's and crossed t's was too much work: better just to cross everything (and you can draw a t over an i if you don't mind a little mess). e's are just c's trying too hard, so best cut them down to size by striking out their central stroke. u's were inverted n's, so they all got a small arrow indicating "rotate." John went on, not minding that his process varied page to page and usually involved finding the path of least effort. If he had a philosophical bent, John might have smiled at the iconoclastic, no \*egoclastic\*, substitution of the individual "I" with the sign of the cross "t". But he hadn't, so he didn't.

Eventually, he got tired of squinting at the letters on the page and trying to judge if "y" counted as a vowel. So, John moved on to "Step A," just restraining himself from replacing "A" with the appropriate consonant.

Safety margins and inclement weather, John couldn't see what place they had in his 8.5" x

11" sheets. Referring to the entry on SAFETY MARGINS just sent him unhelpfully back to "Step A." John glossed over the inconsistency and set about expanding this margin, decreasing that one, and adding a rakish tilt to the footer, all in the name of safety.

He was getting the hang of this, and it was hardly his fault that he had an obviously faulty translation guide. Nor did it surprise him in the slightest when he got to "Guideline a" mentioning diphthongs. After a quick glance at the dictionary balanced skew on his desk, John learned these were select pairs of vowels, all of which were now artfully amended into consonants through the first three pages. No matter.

As he entered a trance state of redefining and connecting diphthongs with almost-straight lines across the black rows of text, John let his mind wander.

Eventually, and without recalling where his thoughts had drifted, he remembered where he was. Specifically, it was after 5 pm on a workday, and he was still in the office! It was time to leave the desk and its contents until tomorrow.

Conveniently, he had also reached the end of the instructions, having finally applied the last "Recommendation i." He was left with a network of lines, letters, and barely concentric circles strewn across the pages. John couldn't quite remember drawing those curves, but there they were.

Not bothering to flip back through the day's labors, John up and left for an unremarkable commute home, and an equally unremarkable commute back sixteen hours later.

This daily sequence for John of meandering through some translation exercises, followed by forgettable trips to and from his house, ran together down the calendar. One unhurried day, a news report tripped him up.

As a rule, he avoided the treacherous footing of current events. This day, however, he stumbled over a familiar bundle of lines and circles.

An obscure report bubbled to the headlines (it must have been a slow news day) of newly discovered Mayan ruins underneath a patch of Mexican farmland. Beneath the slurry of opinions on ownership and nomenclature and significance, there surfaced John's first day's work at the Bureau. Somehow his scratchings of safety margins and diphthongs had wandered from their page in his OUT bin, and buried themselves as the lost remains of a great stone temple. The circles he had sketched matched exactly the border of a retaining wall. It must have been an absurd coincidence.

Over the months and weeks and nights that followed, John saw his translations crop up in more and more unlikely places in the real world around him. Somehow his work was shaping the world around him, but no one else was noticing. He decided, in an uncharacteristic show of

initiative, to make a test. He would break the rules! He would break the translation rules in such an obvious way that if his outbound papers tried to escape, they'd give themselves away at the first inspection.

The next day, his hand plucked another manila folder from the IN box. This time it contained sketches for a grand landscape painting. Its associated translation manual directed him through the customarily mindless steps of correcting the grammar and manners of each stroke, converting cubits to meters, and adding a simple rhyme scheme. Procedure **ℵ**, Commandments I through X, the 64 Hexagrams, they rolled past. Just before completing the document (a description of an absurd and impossible building smack in the middle of a European capital), John boldly scrawled a memo at the bottom. It was a warning to his work not to stray too far: he'd be watching.

It wasn't until he happened upon an advertisement for a vacation abroad that he noticed the havoc wrecked by his sketches and their attached addendum. That night, his scrawled note had tidied up, leapt, and plastered itself across the cityscape of Rome. Where had once been clear rectilinear streets, John's script handwriting had aligned itself to the straight rule of Via dei Fori Imperiali. His message had tangled the streets on one side into an unrecognizable mess of curls and dead ends. It was unmistakably his handwriting. At the end of this new maze of back alleys, where just before had been an empty plaza, sat the impossible building to which John had signed his name. He had created the Colosseum. What started as a sketch, somehow became real stone. John knew it hadn't existed before, and somehow his "translation" had brought something new into the world. No one else (outside the Bureau) was any the wiser, for the Colosseum had been thoroughly embedded in the past as much as the present.

John was given a small warning on top of his IN box for his minor excesses on that assignment, but otherwise left unscathed. He grew into his role at the Bureau, and learned more of what other assignments were being passed around.

From that night forward he was careful to strictly obey each contradicting instruction given, without adding his opinion. Maybe if he was diligent, the Bureau would reward him with the annual reordering of the English alphabet. He could put "B" second! Wouldn't that be a laugh.