

keep the lid on? Which it was in the interests of society at large to do, as they would surely agree. At the official leadership level, ideas were running out fast. There is only so much manpower and tax revenue that can be devoted to riot control, to social surveillance, to chasing fast youths down dark alleyways, to fire-hosing and pepper-spraying suspicious-looking gatherings. Too many once-bustling cities are stagnant or derelict, especially in the northeast, but other states are being hard hit, especially where long droughts have taken their toll. Too many of the disenfranchised are living in abandoned cars or subway tunnels or even in culverts. There's an epidemic of drugging and boozing: suicide-grade alcohol, skin-blistering drugs that kill you in under a year. Oblivion is increasingly attractive to the young, and even to the middle-aged, since why retain your brain when no amount of thinking can even begin to solve the problem? It isn't even a problem, it's beyond a problem. It's more like a looming collapse. Is their once-beautiful region, their once-beautiful country, doomed to be a wasteland of poverty and debris?

[Ed lowers his voice: serious stuff coming up. Sure enough, one comes a PowerPoint with a slew of graphs. The financial big guns have concealed the true statistics to avoid panic, he says, but a shocking 40 percent of the population in this region is jobless, with 50 percent of those being under twenty-five. That's a recipe for systems breakdown, right there: for anarchy, for chaos, for the senseless destruction of property, for so-called revolution, which means looting and gang rule and warlords and mass rape, and the terrorization of the weak and helpless. That is the grim prospect staring everyone in this area right between the eyes. They've already noticed the symptoms for themselves, which is - he is sure - why they saw the desirability of signing in.

What can be done? Ed asks, wrinkling his brows. How to

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their prisoners to death while working them to the bone. No matter how much the prisoners were vilified by the politicians and the press as filthy dregs and toxic scum, still, heaps of stick-legged corpses can't be hidden from view indefinitely. The odd unexplained death, maybe — there has always been the odd unexplained death, says Ed, shrugging — but not heaps. Some snoop would make a phone video; such things can escape despite the best attempts to keep things under hatches, and who knows what sort of uproar, not to mention uprising, might result?

Stan feels a small prickle at the back of his neck. That's his brother Ed could be talking about! Or maybe not Con specifically; but he's pretty sure that if Ed got a close-up look at Con, he'd file him under toxic scum. It's fine for Stan to use names like that, it's within the family, and it's not that he approves of whatever it is Con is probably doing, but. Is this the kind of rumour Con's been hearing? That Positron is hardcore representative on the subject of sticky fingers? One strike and you're out?

He'd like to phone Conor, talk to him some more. See what he knows about this place really. But he can't do that without a phone. Wait and see, he tells himself. Give the place a chance.

Ed opens his arms like a TV preacher; his voice gets louder. Then it occurred to the planners of Positron, he says — and this was brilliant — that if prisons were scaled out and handled rationally, they could be win-win viable economic units. So many jobs could be spawned by them: construction jobs, maintenance jobs, cleaning jobs, guard jobs. Hospital jobs, uniform-sewing jobs, shoemaking jobs, jobs in agriculture, if there was a farm attached: an ever-flowing cornucopia of jobs. Medium-size towns with large penitentiaries could maintain themselves, and the people inside such towns could live in middle-class

comfort. And if every citizen were either a guard or a prisoner, the result would be full employment: half would be prisoners, the other half would be engaged in the business of tending the prisoners in some way or other. Or tending those who tended them.

And since it was unrealistic to expect certified criminality from 50 percent of the population, the fair thing would be for everyone to take turns: one month in, one month out. Think of the savings, with every dwelling serving two sets of residents! It was time-share taken to its logical conclusion.

Hence the twin town of Consilience/Positron. Of which they are now all such an important part! Ed smiles, the welcoming, open, inclusive smile of a born salesman. It all makes sense!

Stan wants to ask about the profit margin, and about whether this thing is a private venture. It has to be. Someone's got the lucrative infrastructure and supply contracts, walls don't build themselves, and the security systems are top grade, from what he's been able to observe at the gateway. But he stops himself: this doesn't feel like the right moment to ask, because now a great big CONSILIENCE has come up on the screen:

CONSILIENCE = CONS + RESILIENCE. DO TIME NOW, BUY TIME FOR OUR FUTURE!]