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Setting: a YouTube broadcast studio, New Year's Eve 2027.

Cast: 5 adults (could be 2M/3F or 1M/4F)

Run Time: about 30 minutes

### Bradley Stevens Final Broadcast

*A wash of blue twilight opens the show, revealing in shadow the outlines of a broadcast studio that is reminiscent of a late night talk show. The host sits behind a desk center stage, smoking, his features awash in the glow from his iPhone. A guest seated on an adjacent stool is fixated on her own phone. Physically only feet apart, mentally they are islands of self absorption. A Show Runner enters abruptly from stage left.*

Show Runner (*loud*). And we are live in...

*Bradley Stevens hastily opens a drawer, dropping his cigarette inside. They both pocket their iPhones.*

Show Runner (*continuing*). ...3...2...1...on the air!

*An On Air sign above Bradley's desk lights up. A pre-recorded female chorus rings out enthusiastically: "It's The Brad-ley Steve-en's Shhhow!" Studio lights come up. Bradley and his guest become suddenly animated; laughing to imply an off-camera conversation had been in progress.*

Bradley. That's great! I reserve the right to tell that story as a bonus perk for my Patreon subscribers. (*Turning to face audience*). Welcome back to this very special New Year's Eve live-cast of the Bradley Steven's Show. We are talking with Emily Pearson: author, historian and anthropologist. Her new book (*he holds it up*) Primitive Peoples of Ancient Times comes out tomorrow. This of course is a prop. The real book will be released as a digital download. And what a download! Three hundred and eighty-five chapters.

Emily. Don't scare them off Bradley! (*To audience*). No chapter is longer than a Tik Tok.

Bradley. Which is what makes her writing so compelling. If the idea of curling up with a book terrifies you – and it should – think of this as more like...you get to binge an entire season.

Emily. Exactly!

Bradley. I skimmed your book and found it absorbing. To think there were once people right here in America who were living like savages.

Emily: Absolutely. If you go back far enough in time, and I dug deep, you find some scary shit going on.

Bradley: How far back did you go?

Emily. Way back. My book focuses primarily on the early 1990s. That period just before the dawn of the internet. So intriguing! I mean, physically, people looked pretty much the same as you and me. They walked upright. But beyond that...we are miles apart from them as a species. The way the primitives went about their days, living their lives in ignorance. It's shocking. They could scarcely have guessed how profoundly the internet would change their world.

Bradley. Historians I've interviewed cite the 2005 introduction of YouTube as being the turning point in the history of human enlightenment.

Emily. No doubt. The arrival of social media was like turning on a thousand watt light bulb in a pitch black room.

Bradley. So tell us how these early people lived. What was life like in the early 1990s?

Emily. It was harsh. They travelled in packs, for safety I suppose. Entire families would gather to watch movies together. They would sit around the glow of a single TV set in their living room. Not too different from how humans had lived for thousands of years before them, huddled around cave fires.

20<sup>th</sup> Century people waited an entire year for their one chance to catch The Wizard of Oz. It was broadcast by CBS, an old "television" (*performed with air quotes*) network, usually around Thanksgiving. Not only that! People had only one annual opportunity to see A Charlie Brown Christmas. Can you imagine the hardship, Bradley? Nothing was instant. They looked upon these "TV shows" (*air quotes*) as special events, gathering everyone together to watch. Like it was a K-pop concert or something.

Bradley. It is shocking really. You paint such a vivid picture – a window into that period of darkness. Tell us more.

Emily. Well, it was a lonely time. People had no friends. Friending would not be invented until 2004.

Bradley. (*somber*) Of course. You do cover the invention of friendship, by a genius named Zuckerberg, in chapter –

Emily. Ninety-four. The dawn of digital enlightenment. The advent of our Modern Age is based on what historians call a three-legged stool: Facebook, YouTube and Amazon.

Bradley. How different were people before these three beacons of modern life burst onto the scene?

Emily. Everything was different. Take consumerism for instance.

Bradley (*thumbing randomly through the pages*): Right, I saw that. Consumerism. Bezos invented that, right?

Emily. He perfected it. Consumerism existed in ancient times, but not with the purity we enjoy today. Early people seemed to get a perverse thrill out of owning something useful. They got weirdly enduring satisfaction from taking care of items they actually used inside their homes. It was a totally different way of thinking. Horribly inefficient, when viewed as a driver of economic activity. Nothing at all like today's sensible impulse to make a purchase, and then – move straight on to the next purchase.

Bradley. Before the first package even arrives. (*Thumbing the book*) You expand on that in chapter ninety-eight.

Emily. I do. Did you know the entire floating city of Plasticia, where today millions live and work, exists entirely on a foundation of discarded plastic containers? None of which would have been possible without two critical innovations: frenzied consumerism, and short attention spans.

Bradley. Fascinating. Absolutely fascinating. I wish we could talk with you some more, but half our audience is already bored. You go back to playing Candy Crush and we'll move on to our next guest. But first...

*Emily fades into darkness as a special comes up on Bradley. A somber hymn-like organ is heard in the background. Emily discreetly exits, tapping away on her iPhone as she walks off stage.*

Bradley. ...a public service message from a very special sponsor. A cause I believe in so strongly that I personally founded an organization to help. As a poet once said: 'Such is the irony, that the brightest source of light may cast the deepest shadow'.

It has been scarcely three years since deep artificial intelligence freed humanity from the burden of thinking for ourselves. Ai has been nothing short of a miracle in convenience. But as the need for natural intelligence faded, some children today are being born with unusually short foreheads.

*On a video monitor a young child's smiling face appears, the top third of his cranium neatly cropped.*

And hats only hide the problem.

Which is why I have partnered with a cutting edge plastic surgery alternative: ChatBotox. ChatBTX as the kids call it. We will share the phone number for donations later in this program. For now, I only ask that you reach into your hearts, and reach into your wallets, to have a credit card at the ready. Don't let the depression in their heads leave a depression on their hearts.

*Swell of organ music as the special fades out, leaving the studio bathed in shadowy blue light.*

Show Runner (*from edge of proscenium*). Next segment teaser in 3..2...1..go!

*Lights abruptly up. Stool next to Bradley's desk is now vacant. He addresses the audience directly.*

Bradley. The historian I just interviewed reminded us how far human beings have evolved as a species. Thankfully the internet has delivered us from our primitive belief in magic and mystery. Philosophers stopped pondering the meaning of life once anyone could Google it. And what can speak more authoritatively about what it means to truly be alive, than an Ai summary? It's just common sense.

But is there still any room left for mystery and magic in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century? Our next guest claims to be living proof there is. So don't touch that mouse, because you won't want to miss this. She is a mentalist who helps police solve unsolvable crimes. They pay her a lot of money to do so. But...are her talents real? Or is she wasting your tax dollars? We will ask her that question next!

*A smartly-dressed woman stands before a microphone at far stage left, close to the audience.*

Show Runner: Commercial in...3, 2, 1...go!

*On Air sign behind Bradley's desk goes dark, as does his area of the stage. A spotlight or special snaps on to illuminate the woman at the microphone. She speaks brightly.*

MC: Men! Have you been eating beets until you're red in the face, with no positive results to show for it? *(She holds up a banana by the tip of the stem, allowing it to dangle limply in the air)* My husband did too. Then he heard about the amazing effectiveness of the Salt Trick! Your wife will never see it coming! Like all practical advice, it involves one weird trick....

*As the last line above is being delivered MC's light and audio are fading, while light is coming up on Bradley on the studio side of the stage. MC continues her animated patter but now it is a silent pantomime being performed in shadow. Bradley's illuminated studio reveals he is smoking and playing with his iPhone. The guest chair next to him remains empty.*

Show Runner *(stage whisper)*. Bradley, we have a bit of a situation.

*Bradley raises a finger to his lips indicating silence. His other hand is busy on the phone keys, his eyes never leave the glowing screen. After a pause his handler tries again.*

Show Runner: Bradley?

Bradley: Shhh! I am busy.

Show Runner: I see that.

Bradley: Do you know what happened to the last Show Runner who interrupted me while I was playing Royal Match?

Show Runner: No.

Bradley. Of course you don't. Because I fired her immediately. And hired you.

Show Runner. The commercial will be over in ninety seconds.

Bradley. Dandy. *(waiving him/her away without looking up)* Now give me eighty-five seconds of peace.

Show Runner. *(beat)* She isn't here.

Bradley. *(bored)* Who is not where?

*Show Runner, with a sweeping gesture, indicates the empty stool. Bradley nods, engrossed in his phone, barely taking the information in. Then he does a double-take and leaps to his feet.*

Bradley. The goddamn psychic ISN'T HERE?

Show Runner: That is what I've been trying to tell you.

Bradley *(apoplectic)*: Where is she?

Show Runner: Stuck in traffic. There was an accident. It was unforeseen.

Bradley. Bloody clairvoyants – they are all fake! Get that idiot author back. Emery.

Show Runner. Emily.

Bradley. Do I look like I care what she calls herself? Get her back into that chair, man! We've got seconds.

Show Runner: Her Uber just left.

Bradley. Fuck! Tonight of all nights. New Year's Eve. The one and only night of the year we broadcast live to our 1.5 million subscribers.

Show Runner *(looking at their phone)*. Only seven hundred thousand watching.

Bradley. How am I supposed to fill her spot? It's almost fifteen minutes.

Show Runner. Improvise.

Bradley. For fifteen minutes??

Show Runner. Until she appears in that chair.

Bradley: Oh, god.

*Crossfade as studio set darkens and spotlight on the well-dressed commercial announcer begins fading up - along with her bright voice. She is now holding the banana so that the tip forms a firm upward curve.*

MC. ...simple as that! She will thank you tonight, guys. Men's Simple Solutions is a proud sponsor of the Bradley Stevens Show! Now back to tonight's live podcast.... *(Her spotlight fades)*

Show Runner. And we are back live in 3...2...1...we're on the air!

*On Air sign above Bradley's desk illuminates. For an uncomfortable moment Bradley sits shocked and silent behind his desk. His hair is disheveled. A cigarette is raised halfway to his lips.*

Show Runner *(in a stage whisper)*. Come on...come on...

*Like a TV with a loose connection, Bradley winks back to life. He takes a single drag from the cigarette, exhaling slowly. Then tosses the cigarette into a desk drawer and looks up brightly.*

Bradley. It seems there is still some magic left in the world after all. Our medium has managed to dematerialize. *(Show Runner releases the breath s/he was holding, backing out of view stage right)*

Bradley. So I am going to talk about next week's show. It's a real...

*A woman enters hesitantly from stage left. Bradley trails off as he notices her. She looks around, getting her bearings, before approaching the guest chair.*

Bradley. Oh, thank the lord! Have a seat right there. I'd ask how you got through the traffic so quickly but I don't care. And they... *(indicating studio audience)* ...have already forgotten about it.

*Bradley looks directly at the audience.*

Our next guest is a real treat. She helps police detectives crack their toughest cases. But how does she do it? What is the secret to her remarkable success? We are going to dive in deep, asking her the hard questions, live on air. Who knows what dark places she will lead us to? But I can promise you one thing: tonight, we are going to get to the truth!

Woman. That's refreshing. I've tried explaining how I work, but most people don't have the time to –

Bradley. Exactly. Time is a precious commodity these days. You know, a Zen Master once told me that each one of us is here on earth to serve a specific purpose. Your purpose tonight is to keep them *(indicating audience)* from clicking away before we hit the next commercial.

*MC has been seated in darkness on the edge of the stage at far left, playing a game on her phone. When mentioning the commercial Bradley gave her a wave and a wink. With one arm, she gave him a playful salute back, without looking up from her phone.*

Bradley. So we have to keep this brief. Only the absolute essentials.

Woman: Got it.

Bradley (*rifling through notes on his desk*). Er...what is your name?

Woman: Doesn't matter.

Bradley: I like you already. You've been involved in police cases, sensational cases, cases that no one will ever forget. (*Continues rummaging on his desk*) Um...

Woman (*prompting him*). The headless body in a topless bar?

Bradley. Yes!

Woman. That was my first success to hit social media.

Bradley. Terrible case. I mean, a headless body! Discovered after closing by the night security guard. Where do you start with a John Doe when you have no witnesses? And well...to take things at face value, you haven't even got a face.

Woman. They tried for weeks to ID him before calling me in.

Bradley. Legend has it you glanced at the crime scene photos and told the police the victim's name.

Woman. I told them where to look. They found a card with his name in the ambulance.

Bradley. But how did you know a card would be there? Are you one of those psychics who can read objects associated with a crime? (*Sagely to audience*) It's called Psychometry, according to Wikipedia.

Woman. No. I used a different super-power.

Bradley (*making a circling gesture with his arm to indicate speed-it-up*). Three minutes to commercial. What is your super power?

Woman. Oh! I was paying attention.

Bradley. That's it? You were paying attention? That is your super power?

Woman. I noticed something in the crime scene photo everyone else had overlooked.

Bradley, Yes?

Woman. The headless body was wearing a toe tag.

Bradley. Is it unusual for a dead body to be wearing a toe tag?

Woman. At a crime scene, yes. The topless bar was only two blocks from a medical university. So I am already thinking: maybe this is some sort of frat prank, involving a donor cadaver. The toe tag was not on the coroner's autopsy report. You follow? It was there at the crime scene, but it wasn't at the morgue. A toe tag isn't the sort of thing people steal...so it had to have fallen off in the ambulance.

Bradley. Incredible!

*An applause sign lights up, prompting our audience to participate with their approval.*

Bradley. Forensic detectives poured over that case for weeks. You solved it in a day. And you have no formal police training?

Woman. That's right.

Bradley. Yet you picked up on a clue men with highly-specialized criminal degrees failed to see.

Woman. Maybe that was the problem? They were highly-specialized.

Bradley. I don't follow.

Woman. Look into a telescope and what do you get? Highly-specialized vision. You can see objects that are thousands of miles away. But you cannot see what is right in front of you.

Bradley. Interesting theory. How is it you have such an uncanny ability to focus?

Woman. I was raised by wolves.

Bradley. I've heard that. *(Shuffling papers again, looking for notes)* Assumed it was just PR. Myth building.

Woman. Not at all. When I was a toddler my parents took me camping at Yosemite National Park. They couldn't afford a sitter, so I went along. It was the same summer Fortnite came out. I guess they were pretty distracted. I crawled away in the darkness.

Bradley. And the wolves?

Woman. Taught me how to survive. How to find food and shelter.

Bradley. You weren't afraid of them?



Woman. They were oddly comforting. So present, you know? Really alive in the moment. I kept warm at night in their fur. And they taught me how to pay attention. Because if you don't pay attention in the wilderness at night you aren't going to be alive very long.

Bradley (*reading from a card*). You were discovered by nuns at the age of five...

Woman. Yes, elderly nuns. Their convent existed apart from civilization. I was seventeen before I ever saw a smart phone.

Bradley. Child abuse!

Woman. And I still don't have an online presence.

Bradley. Barbaric! (*Bradly looks astonished*) So that's all there is to it? All you do to solve the unsolvable is...you pay attention?

Woman. No. (*Hedging*) I mean, sort of...yes. There are different ways of paying attention. I was also born with a special talent --

*Bradley cuts her off.*

Bradley. Love to hear more. But first... (*Organ music swells as he swivels in his chair to directly face the audience. Previous image of the child with a flattened cranium appears once again on a monitor*).

We are all enjoying the benefits of artificial intelligence. But even as we bask in the glories of automation we must remember to help the next generation. Those who we call 'born Ai natives' have been truly freed from the burden of independent thought. Where technology leads us, our biology adapts. As a result, in some newborns, the shape of their streamlined brain cavity can make the child an easy target for cruelty. No one wants to look or act differently from others.

Now, with your help, they won't have to. Chat BTX can expand their vacant brain cavity with a long lasting cosmetic filler. You'll also be helping the environment, because Chat Botox is made from 100% recycled Styrofoam peanuts. A modern miracle. Even so, no surgery is without cost. Your generous gift will help lift the spirit, and the cranium, of a young person like this. So have your credit card ready and call the number on your screen. Virtual operators are standing by. (*A 900 number replaces the child's face on the video monitor. The studio lights dim and the ON AIR sign over Bradley momentarily goes dark. The background organ music swells to crescendo.*)

Show Runner. Hold on the donation screen for five seconds.

Bradley (*live voice over*). Visit the Bradley Stevens Foundation at Hold-Your-Head-High dot org.

*Bradley, now standing in semi-shadow, pulls open a desk drawer. He removes a flask and draws deeply from it, tilting back his head as the Show Runner continues...*

Show Runner. We are back live in 3...2...

*The flask is tossed back into the desk drawer; drawer slams shut with a bang. Bradley sits.*

Show Runner. ...1...we are live!

*Phone number on screen goes dark as studio lights come up. On Air sign winks on.*

Bradley. Welcome back to this very special New Year's Eve podcast of the Bradley Stevens Show! We are live with a woman who claims to have uncanny powers of concentration. Detectives consult her to solve their most difficult cases. Is she for real? Or is it bullshit? We are going to find out right now.

Woman. Bullshit? Do you need to be so confrontational?

Bradley. I do. We are competing for attention tonight with 10,000 other New Year's Eve podcasts. Attention equals money. Funny quirk about human nature, people stay interested in stories that spark their outrage 20% longer than happy stories.

Woman. Well that is...disturbing.

Bradley. Scientifically proven. And I am playing for that extra 20%.

Woman. But if everyone did that, we'd all be so over-stimulated with outrage and anger we would be at each other's throats. Society would break down into... *(searching for the right words)* ...ideological tribes, always angry about something.

Bradley. Good thing that hasn't happened. Now your most recent case –

Woman. The Marlowe girl's kidnapping.

Bradley. She disappeared from inside a locked room. Police called it a perfect crime.

Woman. They like to use that term when they can't see the solution.

Bradley. Yet you told the police who took the little girl, how he did it, and precisely where she was being held. Cops stormed the house. Just in time, too. She was reunited with her parents that evening.

Woman. Best night of my life.

Bradley. Care to explain how you solved it?

Woman. The Marlowe girl had been kidnapped by a neighbor. *(After a beat)* He confessed.

Bradley. He confessed?

Woman. Yes.

Bradley. To you?

Woman. Yeah.

Bradley. How did you get a confession when the police didn't even know who to accuse?

Woman. It's complicated. I seem to have been born with a special talent.

Bradley. Beyond your ability to pay attention?

Woman. Yes. No. *(She frowns)* I think they are related.

Bradley. Seven hundred thousand people are on the edge of their seats...

Woman. The police asked me to meet individually with different people. All of them adults who knew the little girl. Friends, family, neighbors. When I met the kidnapper, I knew he took her the moment I saw him.

Bradley. You just...looked at him.

Woman. *(realizing how crazy that sounds)* Yeah.

Bradley. And saw straight through to his soul.

Woman. I don't see through things. That's Superman. I saw his soul on the outside.

Bradley. Beg your pardon?

Woman. How do I explain this? Look, we human beings are just little balls of energy racing around on the planet. Think of the space that separates each of our energies as being dead air.

Bradley. Creepy.

Woman. Not at all. Dead air is sort of like a vacuum. It is the only way we can exist separately as individuals. Otherwise our energy would all blend together. We wouldn't be individuals. Now inside this perimeter of dead air, each human is binary.

Bradley *(holding up a hand)*. We don't discuss orientation on this show – too political for the sponsor.

Woman. Binary, in the sense each one of us contains two essential parts: a higher self, what a religious person might call an incorruptible soul, and an ego. The two coexist. And they often get into arguments.

Bradley. I'll bet they do.

Woman. Fear, greed, envy, hate. Those all come from the ego, not the soul. Unfortunately, our modern way of life exploits the ego for profit. Buy this product! Don't miss out! Check out your friend's exotic vacation! In some people the ego becomes so swollen their higher self gets squeezed out. But it doesn't go very far. It stays close to the body, hoping for a chance to get back inside. Their incorruptible soul occupies the dead air right outside the person's body. And in that space the soul is laid bare. There are no secrets. (*beat*) That is how I solve crimes. They confess.

Bradley (*skeptical*). But only to you.

Woman. Well, presumably to everyone. I just seem to be the only one left who is paying attention.

Bradley. So you are an anomaly in the modern world? A holdover from a more primitive time?

Woman. I guess. Now, the freakish thing --

Bradley. This is all plenty freakish.

Woman. -is that once a person's incorruptible soul has fled into dead air, it becomes aware that I can see it. I guess it confesses crimes to me as a last-ditch effort to defeat the ego and get back inside the body. No one wants to be bad. No one wakes up in the morning thinking: I'm gonna be a real jerk today.

MC. Adolf Hitler went to art school. (*Interjecting from her shadowy perch on the far left stage edge*) Not many people know that.

Woman. She gets it!

Bradley. So criminals just...give themselves away to you?

Woman. They do. It's a quirk of human nature. Craziest damn thing. I'm trying to think of a way to explain it. OK, take people who are afraid to go near the edge of a balcony on a high building. What terrifies them isn't the fear they might trip and fall. The odds of a slip and fall accident happening, inside that moment of hyper-awareness, are very small. No, what they fear is that they might have an overwhelming compulsion to leap from the balcony. Jumping will be catastrophic...but you know what? It sure as hell ends all anxiety about whether or not they are going to slip.

Bradley (*flatly*). Wow. (*grins at the audience, enlisting them as confederates in his confusion*) That was a little hard to follow.

Woman. I know. I tried my best. It is a difficult thing to explain. People are full of contradictions, you can't ask me to make their choices sound logical.

Bradley. Perhaps a demonstration of your powers would be more effective?

Woman (*concerned*). Oh, no. That's not a good idea.

Bradley. (*to audience*) I told you we'd get to the truth! (*Aggressively*) Can't do it, can you?

Woman. Of course I can.

Bradley. Then why not demonstrate your abilities? I will be your guinea pig.

Woman. You said seven hundred thousand people are watching.

Bradley (*to audience*). There you have it folks! The power of the internet to flush out the truth. A 'gifted psychic' balks when challenged to demonstrate her alleged talents.

Woman. I'm not afraid for me. I'm concerned for you.

Bradley. Oh please, I insist! Out me! Read my aura. What is my greatest fear? My darkest secret?

Woman (*softly*). Bradley, don't do this.

Bradley. You heard it here first!. Your tax dollars at work, every time your local police use this fraud. Does that make you angry? Great! Then you'll stay engaged through our next commercial.

Woman. Alright. I'll do it.

Bradley (*clapping his hands together in anticipation*). And we'll be right back, after this important message from our friends at META!

Show runner. ...3...2...1...out!

*On Air light goes out. Studio plunges back into blue shadow. Lights come up on MC at her microphone. Throughout the commercial break, Bradley and his guest argue animatedly in pantomime.*

*MC is now wearing virtual-reality goggles. Smiling and swaying, her head lolls back toward the ceiling. She removes the goggles and exclaims.*

Wow! We need to talk, you and I (*indicating studio audience*) about an important midlife challenge. Online dating over 30. The kid sites are not for you. You want to find a serious emotional connection with someone who will be your partner for life. One night stands are not an option. You aren't shallow.

But at the same time...we have to be practical, don't we? Here is the dilemma:

One night stands have an advantage nobody talks about. The big reveal. You know right away whether you are physically compatible with a complete stranger. The alternative, long walks on the beach, evenings together at the movies, quiet dinners in fancy restaurants.... can be a road to disappointment. What if it ultimately it turns out you are incompatible in bed? After all that wasted energy and money! Emotional wooing is not an efficient use of anyone's time. You aren't shallow – but you are realistic.

Which is why I am so excited to introduce META's latest line of business. *(Holds up the virtual reality goggles)* META-Physical. Just put these babies on and there will be no more wondering!

How does it work? Simple. You receive a new match each day in your online dating profile. Visit their META-Physical page to learn all about your potential date: their hopes, their dreams, their Netflix streaming history. If everything looks good, just slip these goggles on. Then click the option in your settings to experience META-Physical. In moments, our incredible simulation places you in bed with your suggested match. Before the two of you ever meet in person!

Don't worry about privacy, the META-Physical product is only for mutually consenting adults. To get started, visit one of our free clinics for a discreet full-body scan. Then enable the option on your dating profile and you will be ready to start experiencing hypothetical wedding nights! *(Organ in background begins to play Here Comes The Bride)*

MC. META-Physical....because this is your time. And your time is valuable. *(MC places the virtual reality goggles back on)* Oh! Oh, my!! *(She starts inching downstage, arms outstretched, lost in a world only she can see)* It's so big...I mean, I wasn't expecting! Oh!!

Show Runner. And we are live in 3...2...1....on the air! *(Lights out on MC. Lights up on studio. Bradley and Woman are glaring at each other across the desk)*

Bradley. We are all waiting for an amazing demonstration of your abilities. Look into my soul and reveal my greatest fear.

Woman. You sure this is what you want?

Bradley. Absolutely.

Woman. Because I can't hurt anyone without their permission.

Bradley. You have my blessing to do your worst.

Woman *(sighs)*. What you fear is...the little kid.

Bradley. Kid?

Woman. From the charity PSA. *(calling offstage)* Can we put the flat-headed kid back on the monitor?

Show Runner *(offstage)*. Bradley?

Bradley *(slight hesitation)*. Do it

*The monitor winks back on, showing the afflicted child with the foreshortened head.*

Woman. There is something funny about that picture.

Bradley. That is precisely the attitude we are fighting against. There is nothing funny about a cranial handicap. Poor Johnny..

Woman. Not his head. Oh, his head is bat-shit weird, for sure. But I meant the sky in the background.

Bradley *(craning his head to see the monitor)*. What could be wrong with a sky?

Woman. Notice how the ends of the clouds aren't rounded? It looks like part of the cloud was cropped out and lowered on the horizontal. Exactly on line with the middle of Johnnie's forehead. It was all Photoshopped. That kid isn't deformed, the picture is.

Bradley. So what?

Woman. So what? It's fraud. You are taking people's money for an affliction that doesn't even exist.

Bradley. If you want to incriminate me you will have to do better than that. The words in our appeal for donations are chosen carefully. I said a contribution will help children 'just like him'. I never claimed Johnny was a real child. Of course that image is representational. *(shakes his head)* Do you think so little of me as to believe I would exploit the image of a real disabled child?

Woman. Ai Cranium Affliction isn't real. There are no 'actual' disabled children.

Bradley. Nonsense. Babies with Ai Affliction are all over the internet. It is a crises.

Woman. That internet story was debunked. *(addressing audience)* Check it out on Snopes.

Bradley *(to audience)*. Cell Phones are to remain off during the podcast. You signed a paper!

Woman. Do you want to quit now and call it a draw?

*Bradley hesitates.*

Bradley. I'm not impressed. Anyone could have picked up on the cropped photo artifacts. Proves nothing, I've explained why we did not use a real child. Your powers remain a hoax in my eyes. And in their eyes (*indicates audience*) as well. Care to try looking into my soul?

Woman (*leaning in*). Is that what you want?

Bradley. That's what I want.

*Pause*

Woman. Your deepest fear is not someone realizing you used a fake photo, in order to raise money for your nonsense foundation, in order to fight a disease that does not exist. Your deepest fear is that someone figures out the foundation isn't even real. That every penny donated goes through three offshore banks...(*beat*)... before being routed right back into your own personal checking account.

Bradley (*tense*). Good luck proving that. The account number on the donation link isn't mine. Not one of the accounts in the wire instructions are my own.

Woman (*standing*). No, they are not. (*She begins walking in circles around his desk, like a dog following a scent, so that Bradley has to turn his head to follow her. Her voice is calm, controlled and devastating*)

Because you found a flaw in the banking system. You knew wire transactions fail every day, for perfectly innocent reasons. Typos, transpositions. It all gets cleaned up in the back offices of international banks. But a few years ago all the human auditors were fired, weren't they? In the name of efficiency. It happened the moment an Ai was developed to correct wire transfer errors.

Bradley (*strained*). Can we go to commercial?

Woman (*walks to edge of stage and speaks directly to audience*). OK, so, you know all those little numbers along the bottom of an old fashioned paper check? Funny thing about them. Only the last digits on the right side are specific to an individual's bank account. Digits on the left end are impersonal, they are bank routing instructions.

*She stops pacing and leans onto Bradley's desk, getting in his face.*

You knew that an error in a number on the personal end of your checking account might raise eyebrows. But when a transaction fails at the other end of the account number, the bank information, automation will simply look for the closest valid bank code. Then Ai corrects the account information automatically.

It was so smart. Every donation fails in Chile, because there is no matching account number for the final deposit. But then the bots rush in to make things right. They auto-fix the typo and it becomes your own bank's routing number. Every time. So no wire instructions coming from the United States will ever match your account number. But the money always gets to you, doesn't it?



Bradley. You... *(he spits out the word as if choking)* ...freak!

Woman. Your plan was perfect. It really was the perfect crime. The only mistake you ever made was doubting yourself. That fear, deep inside, that someone would be able to figure it all out. You lived with that and it gnawed at you. It kept you up at night.

Bradley *(jumping to his feet)*. Security! Get her out of here. She is talking nonsense. Don't air this crap, edit her whole segment out of the podcast. *(to audience)* And don't get any funny ideas, you all signed a non-disclosure agreement before entering this auditorium.

*Woman stands next to him. Putting a compassionate arm around his shoulder, her voice becomes that of a parent consoling a tantruming child.*

Woman. Bradley, it's New Year's Eve, remember? Your one and only live podcast. You can't edit this out. It already streamed to seven hundred-thousand people. People who are on their phones right now checking my information. Your donors will be outraged by what they find. Do you know what outrage means, Bradley? It means they will stay focused 20% longer. Long enough to call their lawyers.

*Bradley collapses into his chair. His elbows on the desk, his head falls forward into his arms.*

Woman *(musing without emotion)*. I imagine a class action suit is the route they will take. After all, there have to be thousands of donors you've defrauded...

*Bradley begins sobbing into his hands. Woman bends to speak into his ear.*

Woman. Deep down you wanted to be caught. You wanted it to end. Sure, you will go to prison. But never again will you wake up at night wondering if tomorrow is the day. The day you lose your job, your family. The day your life collapses. You are free of that anxiety forever, Bradley Stevens. You have jumped from the balcony.

*She pats his shoulder as he continues to sob. Then slowly makes her way off stage. Bradley remains, slumped across his desk. Show Runner appears abruptly.*

Show Runner. Commercial in 3...2...1

*Lights dim over studio and come up stage left, where MC stands stalwart before her mic stand. In each hand she holds up a banana: one is yellow, the other green. She begins speaking brightly.*

MC. Now for the truth about ripe versus green bananas! Can't go? Here is a simple trick to clean out stuck poop...

*Her voice fades as her light dims and she continues silently gesticulating in the shadows. Lights fade up on studio side where Bradley remains collapsed on his desk.*

Show Runner. (*breathless*) That was an incredible monologue!

Bradley: Monologue?

Show Runner: You really opened up out there. *Show runner begins wiping down Bradley's shirt with a white towel, in the manner of a boxer being tended to after a round.*

I mean, brutally honest! I'm not sure how your investors will react. The comments are lighting up...donors are NOT happy. But it was great entertainment! Totally going viral.

Bradley. I don't understand.

Show Runner. What's to understand? You were brilliant! Just going schizo talking to yourself like that, alone at your desk, for fifteen solid minutes. Baring your soul in front of thousands. I've gotta hand it to you, Bradley Stevens. Who needs guests to interview? You, my friend, are a one man tornado. You can really fill dead air!

Bradley (*looking up sharply*). Dead air?

Show Runner. But we're good now. The psychic finally got here. She's in makeup. No worries. She will be out as soon as the commercial ends.

Bradley (*looking directly at audience, dazed*). The psychic finally got here.

Show Runner. Just in time. Laxative commercial is about to end.

Bradley. I can...really...fill dead air.

Show Runner. And we are live again in three, two, one – we're on the air!

BLACKOUT

The cast:

Bradley Stevens. (male, middle-ish aged, dressed in a blazer and tie)

Emily Pearson (female, age should appear contemporary to Bradley or younger, dressed professionally)

Show Runner: (any age, either sex, casual attire – jeans, sweatshirt)

Michele Connelly “MC”: (female, any age, bright and vivacious, dressed to get attention)

The Woman: (female, young adult, dressed formally but plainly, not flamboyant in attire)

Notes:

- If a TV screen monitor is not available for the child’s photo, a cardboard mounted enlargement could be paraded in front of the audience at the appropriate times by MC.
- I do not smoke and do not endorse smoking; it is however an essential element of Bradley’s artificial stimulus craving persona. Would recommend inexpensive and realistic flameless theatrical cigarettes, which come filled with baby powder.
- I can build or supply most of the special props needed (i.e. the On Air and Applause signs).
- The director is free to add touches to encourage audience participation. The audience should feel they are ‘part of the show’ as an invited studio audience for a live internet stream.