

A NOVEL

BOOT STRAPS

Pull yourself up. Pull each other up.



A black comedy of the American farm

PETER SHEPPARD

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*For everyone who was ever told to pull themselves up,
and for everyone who reached down and pulled.*

"Bootstrap (n.): a loop at the back of a boot, used to pull it on."

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CHAPTER ONE

Sunsetted

From the notebook of Marcus Dupree, Column F

Lesson 1. If a meeting invite says MANDATORY in capital letters and has no agenda, the agenda is you.

Marcus Dupree owned fourteen lanyards, and he could tell you where every one of them came from.

They hung from a brass hook beside the standing desk in his Houston townhouse, arranged by year, like the rings of a tree. Lean Summit, Dallas, 2012. Operational Excellence Forum, Orlando, 2015. Global Supply Chain Leadership Retreat, Scottsdale, 2019, where he had given a keynote titled "What Gets Measured Gets Managed" to four hundred people and a buffet of shrimp. He had been told afterward by a man from Procter & Gamble that it had changed his life. Marcus had written down the man's name. He kept that, too.

At 6:52 on a Tuesday morning in July, Marcus stood in front of the mirror in his home office wearing a crisp white dress shirt, a navy tie, and a pair of plaid pajama pants. The camera only saw you from the chest up. Marcus had

calculated, years ago, that pants were the single least efficient garment in the remote-work era.

"Good morning, team," he told the mirror. "What gets measured gets managed."

He frowned. Too bright. He lowered his voice half an octave.

"Good morning, team. What gets measured... gets managed."

Better. He took a sip of his green smoothie, which contained kale, spinach, half a banana, chia seeds, and a powder that promised "cognitive clarity" in letters that were not legally binding. He was forty-five years old and Vice President of Operational Excellence at Omnivance Global, a company that did something with logistics, something with software, and something with chemicals, depending on which quarter's annual report you read. He had been there eleven years. He had reduced cycle time in the Americas region by eighteen percent. He had a framed certificate that said so.

His laptop chimed. A calendar notification slid into the corner of the screen.

ALL-HANDS REALIGNMENT — MANDATORY —
CAMERAS ON

Marcus smiled. He loved a realignment. Realignment meant change, and change meant projects, and projects meant charts, and charts were where Marcus Dupree felt most like himself.

"Realignment," he said to nobody. "Love it."

He clicked JOIN.

• • •

The screen filled with faces. Forty-seven little rectangles, arranged in a grid, each one a window into someone's morning. Marcus did what he always did in large meetings, which was count. Forty-seven. Then he noticed something else, the kind of thing you notice all at once and then cannot stop noticing.

Nearly every face in the grid was Black.

There were people in suits and people in bonnets. There was a man clearly sitting in his car in a parking garage, the steering wheel visible at the bottom of the frame. There was a woman holding a baby who was eating a sock. There was Dr. Angela Whitfield-Boyd, the Chief Culture Officer, in a soft gray cardigan, sitting with the posture of a ballerina in front of a ring light so bright it could have guided ships to harbor. Behind her, framed, was a poster that read CULTURE EATS STRATEGY FOR BREAKFAST.

There was Terrence Okafor, from Legal, wearing a full three-piece suit at seven in the morning, his law books lined up behind him in alphabetical order. Marcus had exchanged roughly eleven hundred emails with Terrence over the years and had never once seen him in person. Terrence's emails were famous. They began with "Per my last email" so often that someone in Finance had once made a T-shirt.

There was Keisha Price, whom everyone called KP, a senior data scientist who sat in front of four monitors and a dead fern. She was eating cereal out of a glass measuring

cup. KP had built the algorithm Omnivance used to evaluate employee performance. Marcus had sat through her presentation on it. It had been the most beautiful thing he had ever seen, and he had understood perhaps a third of it.

Then the center box went big, and Chad appeared.

Chad Winslow III was thirty-one years old. He wore a quarter-zip fleece vest over a gingham shirt, and his teeth were so white and so even that they looked like a stock photo of teeth. He was sitting in front of a bookshelf. It was a virtual background. You could tell because one of the books floated about an inch off the shelf, hovering there, untroubled by gravity, like Chad himself.

Chad was a consultant. Nobody at Omnivance knew exactly which firm Chad came from, only that he had arrived eighteen months earlier, that he reported directly to the Executive Committee, and that every project he touched ended with fewer people in it.

"Team!" Chad said. "Good morning, good morning! Can everybody see my screen? Thumbs up if you can see my screen."

Forty-six thumbs went up. The man in the parking garage honked his horn.

"Love that," said Chad. "Love the energy. So! Super exciting news. To stay compliant with our federal contracts in this new environment, Omnivance is evolving."

He shared a slide. White background. Blue letters. Sans-serif font. The kind of slide that looked like it had been designed by a committee that had never been in love.

RIGHT-SIZING OUR DIVERSITY JOURNEY

Marcus read it twice. Then he read it a third time, because he was an analytical man and he believed in giving data a fair chance.

Angela unmuted. "Chad," she said, in the soft, steady voice she used to calm executives in crisis, "I'm the Chief Culture Officer. I've never seen this deck."

"Angela!" said Chad, as if she had just arrived at a party. "Great question. That's actually because your role is being... sunsetted."

There was a pause in which forty-seven people listened to the hum of their own refrigerators.

"Sunsetted," Angela said.

"Like the sun," said Chad. He made a gentle arc with his hand, the sun going down over a peaceful sea. "Beautiful. Natural. Inevitable."

Marcus unmuted before he had decided to. "The sun comes back up tomorrow, Chad."

Chad looked into his camera. For a long moment, he did not blink.

"Great energy, Marcus," he said.

Terrence unmuted next. He leaned forward until his face filled his entire rectangle, and he spoke the way he spoke in depositions, each word placed on the table like a playing card.

"Chad. I need to point out something for the record. Every single face in this grid is Black."

"Which is exactly why," said Chad, nodding, "leadership has decided these layoffs are strictly merit-based."

It took a moment for the sentence to travel. Marcus watched it land in forty-seven rectangles, one at a time, like rain moving across a parking lot.

KP did not even put down her measuring cup. "I built the merit algorithm," she said, with her mouth full. "It doesn't say that."

"KP!" said Chad. "Your algorithm was also sunsetted. We replaced it with a new one. It's called Vibes."

"That's not an algorithm."

"Not with that attitude," said Chad.

He clicked again. The new slide showed a piece of clip art: a cartoon man in a business suit climbing a mountain. The man was barefoot. Above him, in cheerful yellow letters, it said NEXT STEPS: YOUR JOURNEY BEGINS NOW!

"Your laptops will be deactivated in ninety seconds," Chad said brightly. "Your badges already have been. HR has put together a really fun resource packet for you called *Bootstraps: You Got This!* It has links, it has a playlist, it has a really empowering quote from a founder I deeply admire. Please do not reply to this meeting."

Marcus's mouth had gone dry. Somewhere in his chest, a process he had never mapped was beginning to fail.

"Chad," he said. "I have a quarterly business review at nine."

"And that review," said Chad, "will now be self-guided."

"Who am I presenting to?"

"Yourself, Marcus," said Chad, and he smiled like a man giving away a car. "Growth!"

Marcus opened his mouth to say something. He was never sure, afterward, what it would have been. Something about cycle time, maybe. Something about eleven years. Something about the man from Procter & Gamble.

His screen went black in the middle of the first word.

• • •

He sat there.

The laptop's dark screen reflected his own face back at him: a forty-five-year-old man in a tie and pajama pants, holding a green smoothie, in a room full of whiteboards. Behind him, in the reflection, the fourteen lanyards swayed gently in the breeze from the ceiling fan, like the tails of fourteen very small kites.

"What gets measured," Marcus whispered.

He looked down at his smoothie. It had gone brown.

"...gets sunsetted," he finished.

He did not cry. Marcus Dupree did not cry. Instead, he did what he always did when a system failed: he opened a fresh legal pad, uncapped a pen, and wrote at the top of the page, in clean block capitals, ROOT CAUSE.

He stared at it for eleven minutes. Then he wrote, underneath it, *Chad*.

Then he crossed out *Chad*, because blaming individuals was poor process discipline, and wrote *Chad (systemic)*.

Then he went and put on pants.

• • •

That night, Marcus did what he always did at the end of a project.

He opened a spreadsheet.

He had done this after every initiative of his career: the Memphis warehouse consolidation, the Lean Asset Initiative, the Great Lanyard Standardization of 2019. When a project ended, you held a post-mortem. You opened a file. You made columns. Column A was the date. Column B was the event. Column C was the root cause, D was the impact, and E was the corrective action. And Column F, which nobody ever read, and which Marcus had added himself in 2014 after a very long night in a distribution center outside Tulsa, was *Lessons Learned*.

He typed the date in Column A.

In Column B he typed: *Position sunsetted*.

He sat looking at Column C for a long time. Root cause. He tried *budget realignment*. He deleted it. He tried *regulatory environment*. He deleted that too. He tried *Chad*, and looked at it, and felt briefly better, and then deleted it, because Chad was not a root cause. Chad was a symptom wearing a vest.

In the end he left Column C blank. It was the first blank cell he had left in a post-mortem in eleven years.

He went to Column F instead and typed: *If a meeting invite says MANDATORY in capital letters and has no agenda, the agenda is you*.

He saved the file. He named it *LESSONS_LEARNED_FINAL.xlsx*. Then, because he had been in corporate America for twenty-two years and knew that nothing was ever final, he renamed it *LESSONS_LEARNED_FINAL_v2.xlsx*.

Then he sat in the dark of his home office and thought about his father.

Lionel Dupree had worked thirty-four years at the big refinery in Baton Rouge, first as a pipefitter's helper and then as a pipefitter and then, for the last twelve years, as a foreman, which meant he got to come home every night smelling of crude oil *and* responsibility. He had big hands, cracked at the knuckles in winter, and he used to hold them out over the kitchen table and tell his son, "Look at these. You see these? You get the degree, Marcus, so you never got to have hands like these."

So Marcus had gotten the degree. Then he had gotten the other degree. Then he had gotten the certificates, Six Sigma Green Belt and Black Belt and, briefly, a sort of fuchsia belt from a program in Scottsdale that turned out not to be accredited. He had gotten a townhouse with a standing desk and a Peloton. He had gotten hands that were soft as a pair of church gloves.

His father had died in 2021. At the funeral, a dozen old men from the refinery had come up to Marcus one at a time, every one of them with those same big cracked hands, and told him that Lionel Dupree had talked about his son the vice president constantly. Every day. At lunch, in the control room, on the unit. *My boy runs operations for a Fortune 500. My boy's got an office in a tower.*

Marcus looked at his hands on the keyboard.

He thought about Simone's tuition. Spelman cost \$53,000 a year, before books, before the trips home, before the dorm fridge she had begged for that made ice in the

shape of little hearts. He had always said it the way his father said things across the kitchen table: *Don't you worry about the money, baby. Your daddy's got it.*

He opened a second tab and began to calculate how long his daddy had got it.

The answer was four months. Five if he sold the Peloton.

He looked at the number for a while. Then he closed the laptop, very gently, the way you might close the door on a sleeping child, and sat in the dark.

End of the free sample

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Boot Straps

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