

Thanks for reviewing!

FO

*Fake Omaha is a sprawling, mixed-media project. Over its 20+ year existence, it has lived mostly on a map. The following pages preview a new component: a **narrative**. It tells stories from the map.*

*Like the whole project, the narrative is experimental and a work in progress. As such, please approach this **draft content** with a few things in mind:*

All characters are fictitious

Many characters draw inspiration from real people. However, no single character (not even the narrator!) is a direct, one-to-one stand-in for any real person.

I am consulting with lots of real people

If you're seeing this, you're probably one of them! The project relies on a diverse range of knowledge and experience. I'll continue to engage real contributors to ensure credible, considerate content.

Details are subject to further research and fact-checking

The project mentions countless figures, measurements, cost estimates and other details meant to be realistic. Before final release, I will work with contributors to verify such technical items.

Place names, street names, addresses are preliminary

The narrative interfaces extensively with the map. With the map not yet finished, geographic references are placeholders. They'll be updated when the map reaches a minimum viable edition.

"My" narrative focuses on one layer of the project

Fake Omaha is a "layered" project. Each layer addresses a different subject; each layer may be expressed in a variety of formats. I chose to explore "my" layer through a written, first-person narrative.

This is -not- ready for a wider audience

I am somewhat shy about Fake Omaha. I trust that, by lending your time and perspective, you'll recognize that it's very personal for me. So, for now, please keep it close. And, if you see something that isn't right, help me to improve it!

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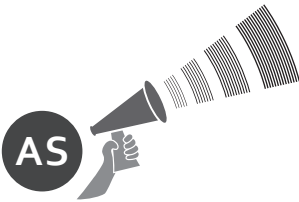
Book I

Start

NEW!

Pho 249

604 Court St #1
Lomax



Alex S.
409 shouts

1pm class cancelled so I wandered off campus and randomly found this place. In a cool old building.

Beef pho (OG!) and veg/seafood options.
Broth was more floral (?) than i'm use to.
They were out of fresh rolls and there was no lime with the veggies that come with pho.

New spot so maybe they are working out kinks. Super friendly people. Good addition to dt Lmx and I will check it out again.

DRAFT

“**GO** ahead. Get a ‘B’. See what happens.”

Was that a challenge or a validation? It certainly spoke to me. I was a solid ‘B’ student. Maybe A-minus in a quarter with no science classes. In any case, it was unlikely advice from a teacher.

I looked around the classroom to gauge reactions.

From some, there was a wry, one-note snort-laugh – which quickly turned to an introspective nod. These, I suspect, were the ‘C’ students. The message landed: dial up the effort and a ‘B’ is within reach. A modest improvement with a smack of real-life wisdom: once you’re out of here, your work ethic will matter and your grades will not.

Another set of students gasped in horror. Get a ‘B’? Didn’t Mr Pratt know that this was junior year? These kids meant business. They were burnishing their four-points and stacking their afternoons with well-documented volunteer work. Anything short of an ‘A’ would compromise their college applications.

Mr Pratt relished this tension. It sparked lively discussion in his class. It caused us to question our assumptions, out loud and in front of our peers. I knew of more than one instance where Pratt’s words brought him a stern talking-to from the administration. No worry. He

was – as he frequently reminded us – two years from retirement. He had little to risk in preaching his subversive doctrine.

Six weeks later. A Wednesday in March, gray skies allowing a few sunrays to poke through. It was the class period right before lunch and everyone was cranky. Conditions were ripe to spend the full 80 minutes arguing over whatever topic Mr Pratt had presented.

The clock struck 12:16, the bell rang and Mr Pratt capped the raucous affair with his trademark sentiment. This time, he couched it in further context: “And it’s true! It’s better to get a ‘B’ at doing *something* than an ‘A’ at doing nothing!”

That made even more sense to me. I always liked *doing*, whether I got a ‘B’ or no grade at all. I barely registered the thought before I said it aloud on my way out the door. “I like doing stuff.”

I wasn’t really talking to anyone. Which didn’t stop Mr Pratt from taking the bait and turning it on me: “Yeah? Then you should *do* City & Country next year.”

* * *

City & Country. It was a sort of study abroad program for 17 year olds at a public high school. Rather than turning participants loose in Florence or Glasgow or Salamanca, it matched them to other parts of the US within a half-day’s travel. If you had a passport, you might even go to Canada.

C&C’ers spent four non-consecutive weeks away from school and at their sites. They covered both urban and rural areas. Back in the classroom, they traded notes. They would apply their insights toward mock political campaigns, funding proposals, other dress rehearsals for civic engagement.

City & Country was Mr Pratt’s pride and joy. In the setting of C&C, he went by his first name, Sam. The whole thing recalled the heady days of experimental learning – “before education went corporate,” he’d chide. Years on, Mr Pratt – Sam – remained the program’s sponsor. He arranged the locations, co-taught the class and recruited the annual roster of fifteen students.

City & Country had never crossed my mind. I always considered

it the domain of smug overachievers – the ones whom Mr Pratt was not-so-secretly rooting against. That day before lunch, he explained otherwise. To make an impact, C&C required a mix of participants. Different cultural backgrounds, different socioeconomic status, and, yes, different report cards. As though *he* was seeking an ‘A’ from *me*, Mr Pratt recited a list of reasons why I would be a good fit. I was surprised he’d been watching so close.

The following Monday night, I rode my bike to a hearing of the local zoning commission. Top of the agenda: a fast food restaurant proposing to add a third driveway. This should have been so dry and boring – yet it stirred impassioned testimonies from developers, engineers and irascible neighbors. Some of it bordered on farce. It was every bit as entertaining as the documentary-style sitcom I was missing on TV.

I ripped out a piece of looseleaf and wrote a summary of the meeting. It would serve as my application to City & Country. The next morning, I ran across Mr Pratt in the hallway. I dug into my backpack and handed him the paper. He inspected it right there, stroking his beard. After 30 seconds, he welcomed me aboard in very Sam Pratt fashion: “Let’s do.”

* * *

My own City & Country experience unfolded in the opposite order. Country, city; country, city.

Halfway between the tiny rural towns of Cardwell and Giffords, I arrived at the farm of Sarah & Nathan Zemanek. Facing the highway, there was a small patch of boutique seasonal gourds. Behind it, a vast corn and soybean operation. I wouldn’t dare round up the size after hearing Nathan tell it: “992 acres – not one more, not one less.”

Sarah tasked me with walking the beans. To keep the soy crops happy, I’d swing a blade and slash down errant weeds.

Seeing that I was receptive to farmwork, Nathan took me to Giffords on a mission to sell 751 bushels of corn. He wasn’t one to say much, though by now we had calibrated to each other’s company. On the return trip, he outlined the nuances of commodity pricing. I

detected a trace of mistrust toward Big Ag.

Sarah & Nathan's youngest son, Chris, was still living on the farm. One early evening, Nathan dispatched Chris and me to check on pooling water in the field. Chris diagnosed the problem immediately: a corroded irrigation valve.

Unlike his parents, Chris talked nonstop. He carried out a flawless valve replacement while chatting easily about baseball, his older siblings and his hope to come visit me someday. Over the course of my stays at the Zemanek farm, Chris and I became friends. To this day, we catch up once or twice a year.

* * *

It was mid October. En route to Fake Omaha, I felt slighted. Come on, Sam Pratt. My fellow C&C'ers are off to exciting, cosmopolitan centers and I'm relegated to a city best known for being *average*? Perhaps *the* place that inspired the term "flyover"?

I navigated to the South Francesville neighborhood, 2253 Eason Street, to be exact. It was a tidy three-story apartment building where I'd find my hosts, Linnea & Jorge.

Linnea met me at the front door. She was very outgoing and very intense. She was an emergency room doctor, second-guessing her decision to pick up an extra shift on her normal day off. She showed me my quarters and rushed off to the ER. Fifteen minutes later, Jorge came home. We exchanged small talk as he fixed a pot of cinnamon tea. Jorge's work was also demanding – some kind of corporate tax law that I didn't understand. My time with Linnea & Jorge was pleasant but our interactions were sporadic. For the most part, I was on my own.

Sam had equipped me with a list of 20 potential things to do in Fake Omaha. It was not a sightseeing guide. It was a menu of everyday errands and civic forums, rounded out by a few cultural highlights. As part of C&C, my assignment was to fulfill ten items on the list.

I bought a pound of apples at the corner market. *Check*. I went to the opening of an art show featuring works by people my age. *Check*. I visited a neighborhood post office, where I mailed off some hand-written notes to a C&C classmate. *Check*.

Browsing Sam's list, several choices appeared similar to the zoning meeting – the one that launched me onto this journey. I circled an upcoming “feedback session” put on by FORTA, the local public transit agency. In Fake Omaha, I was taking the bus to reach many of my activities. The feedback session would give me another window into this mundane utility.

By this point, I realized that public meetings attracted people who complain. With transit service as the subject, I expected to hear grievances about late buses, surly drivers, uncomfortable waiting areas. In my short tenure as a FORTA rider, I'd experienced my own share of frustrations.

The feedback session began. I sensed a much different pitch than the zoning meeting. This audience was not imagining distant, theoretical concerns about their property values. They were recounting recent and actual failures of the transit system. One by one, riders described missed doctor's appointments, docked pay, broken promises to spend mornings with grandchildren. Plenty of the stories could qualify as sad; the people telling them just seemed exhausted.

In the back of the room, a line of FORTA staffers sat blank-faced. *When can we go home?* Of the people representing the agency, exactly one engaged with the public. She had a podium available but chose to circulate among the crowd. She made eye contact with each person who spoke, nodding with empathy. Participants appreciated her earnest demeanor: *I can't promise to solve your problem, but I hear you and I'll look for ways to help.* As the meeting progressed, tensions eased.

The facilitator showed particular skill when winding the meeting down. Twenty minutes before the published end time, she took the last official comment. After that, people from FORTA – as in, her alone – would stick around for informal discussion.

Indeed, the FORTA crew in the back dispersed without delay. At the front, meeting attendees rushed toward the friendly facilitator. Maybe they could sneak in one more complaint; maybe they could stay in touch until their issue was resolved.

I was there as an observer. I didn't want to knock the facilitator off-task, but thought she could use some positive reinforcement. I got

close enough to offer, “wow, you really handled that well.”

She acknowledged my assessment with a shrug. *I handled it well? If you say so.* She was already moving on to the next person. She cut off our encounter by handing me a business card. There was the FORTA logo, a bulky, dark red trapezoid reminiscent of the title screen to a 1980s arcade game. Below it, the facilitator’s info: Cynthia Bayless, Manager of Community Compliance.

The session adjourned. My checklist was complete. I’d be leaving Fake Omaha tomorrow. It was a crisp fall night and I decided to walk back to Linnea & Jorge’s. The route took me past home renovations, a park with new playground equipment, an entire street torn up for sewer replacement. Looking around, something occurred to me: behind each of these projects was a fight. And not necessarily in a bad way.

I’d witnessed it at the zoning meeting and I just saw it at the FORTA meeting. Sometimes action only comes from reaction. Sometimes the ideas are grand but the way there is not glamorous. Whatever the goal, it’s all an endless cycle of compromises, conversations, cobbling together alliances and making a case. Every little step moves the needle. In a messy and nonlinear sense, we were all working toward improvement. The *why* and the *how* were always up for debate – that was the real challenge. And the real fun.

I shared this breakthrough with my City & Country cohort. It was one of the very last class sessions in all of high school and – rightly or wrongly – I felt emboldened and worldwise. Exiting the room that day, I asked Sam half-jokingly, “well, worthy of an ‘A’?”

He didn’t bother to look up from his yellow notepad. “Oh, C&C is *pass/fail*.”

* * *

My first full-time job was with a small civil engineering practice, Marsico & Thakar. An engineer I was not, yet I was drawn to (and minimally qualified for) their Project Scoping Associate position. My colleagues referred to me as a “site scout”. At the beginning of a project, I’d venture out to collect basic information about parking lots

or drainage channels or underpasses. My kit consisted of a camera, a sketchbook and a measuring wheel. I'd compile my findings into a project brief. From it, the real engineers could plan their own site visits with much fancier tools.

I'd been site scouting for less than a year. At the regular Monday team meeting, Jerry Marsico announced a new project. It would be our biggest to date, and also the first major job outside of the immediate area. M&T would "sub" to a larger firm on sidewalk and streetscape upgrades. It was a high-profile, politically sensitive joint effort of Ogden County and the city of Lomax.

The entire package would hit hundreds of individual locations. The reconnaissance needs were immense. As Jerry revealed a map splattered with pink and green dots, Shiwani Thakar looked straight at me. I read her focused gaze: *you're good in the field, you seem to enjoy it, and I know you don't mind traveling.* Her intent was not to flatter me; her intent was to activate me.

My read was correct. Before the week was over, Shiwani and I charted out six months of intensive site-scouting. My calendar would revolve around multi-day trips to Lomax. Once there, I'd conduct most of my work alone. As needed, I'd confer with local stakeholders. It would be like City & Country all over again. Although this time, city and *county*.

* * *

Every large metropolitan area has a place like Lomax. They're 30 or so miles from the big city, though to call them *suburbs* isn't quite right. They have a street grid, a proper downtown, older residential stock and a legacy industrial base. They're on a secondary river or a long-established railroad. They may have some relationship with the big central city, but their histories are distinct. They're small cities in their own right.

Once upon a time, rolling hills and family farms sat between these small cities and the nearest big city. By the late 1960s, movement away from the *alpha* central city swallowed not only the rural areas – but also the small cities. Lomax and places like it became little islands

of city, incongruous with the highways, strip malls and cul-de-sacs multiplying on all sides.

In parallel, many Lomaxes were losing economic vitality. They developed reputations as *no zones*, miniature versions of the troubled big cities up the pike. They were stubborn barriers to the total suburbanization of otherwise booming areas.

Lomax itself weathered another blow. Downtown, at the northeast corner of H Street & Trunk Line Avenue, stands a historic courthouse. Lomax was – and legally still is – the seat of Ogden County. However, in the 70s, the county government moved most of its functions to Oberon, a wealthy suburb twelve miles west. More than 1,500 county administrators vacated a cluster of cast-iron buildings near the courthouse.

The ensuing years were not kind to Lomax. Population sagged. Crime spiked. Plans to revitalize downtown came and went. In 1986, the Lomax Bypass opened. A broad concrete ribbon in a disused railroad trench, the Bypass invited motorists to speed between suburbs – with no exposure to anything that resembled a city. *Bypass*. The road's name happily emphasized prevailing attitudes toward Lomax.

In the 1990s, two things changed.

First, while the popular storyline was not paying attention, Lomax started to grow. It provided basic urban amenities just a short distance from thousands of suburban consumers. Absent the pressures of a major city, prices were low. These features appealed to several demographics. Immigrants and multigenerational families fixed up old houses. Artists began welding and glassblowing in forgotten cinder block buildings.

Then, as advised by the Ogden2K report, elected officials evaluated the County's position heading into the new millennium. The soft-focus glow of 70s-style suburbia would not last forever. No one suggested a wholesale pivot away from the low-density landscape. Nonetheless, to stay competitive, the County would need to expand choices for residents and businesses. Ideas about how to do that varied, yet all agreed on one point: a credible vision of a "diverse, dynamic" Ogden County could not *bypass* Lomax.

In addition to the Bypass, main surface streets in Lomax were

under County control. They were thus subject to the County's priorities: move as many cars as possible, as fast as possible. Design templates explicitly discouraged any other use of the roadway.

On my first couple of trips to Lomax, I walked the scraggly flanks of South Avenue, Overland Road, Morningstar Highway. Wearing a reflective vest, I snapped pictures of the incomplete sidewalk network: random dashes of pavement, stitched together by narrow, muddy footpaths. As an initial peace offering, the County committed to filling these gaps.

The City rolled in a related element: bus stops. At the time, Lomax had a bare-bones transit system. Once an hour, six days a week, scratched-up buses would trace slow, meandering loops around town. Anyone using this limited system would contend with hostile roadside conditions. Our project presented a chance to improve infrastructure on the County's dime.

* * *

My third visit to Lomax. The first one where I'd show face. It was the monthly project coordination meeting. I arrived at the old courthouse at 10:57am; it took me another 15 minutes to find the basement conference room.

There was a cautiously collaborative buzz around the table. Updates were underway. Even though I was late and I missed introductions, it was my turn to speak. I described the pedestrian experience in Lomax. When I went into detail on bus stops, one person visibly perked up. She looked familiar.

Outside after the meeting, a planner from the County invited everyone to lunch at "Terry Mar". In his nasal suburban accent, it sounded like the dining room at a golf course or an assisted living facility. He declared that we'd be walking there: across the tracks and five blocks east on H Street. I tempered my expectations for the food – but thought the stroll could be instructive.

Refreshed by the early spring air, we poured into a cheerful taqueria, *Tierra y Mar*. This was already looking better. From the full meeting of 25 people, eight or nine chose to walk ten minutes for

authentic tacos. It was a bit of self-filtering that mirrored another split: those who attended the monthly meetings because their supervisors told them to, and those who believed in the project.

Over lunch, conversation was casual. It kept circling back to the person who liked my bus stop report. Assorted chatter taught me a lot about her. She had been a paralegal. She once dabbled in real estate. She helped her sister open a franchise of a place that cuts fruit into the shape of flowers for festive occasions.

She'd been involved with public transit for a while – that explained her interest in bus stops. Now, she had an enhanced role. Among friends, she admitted to being unclear about it.

Someone addressed her by name. “You wanna go in on *flan* for dessert, Cynthia?”

Of course. Cynthia Bayless from FORTA. I suddenly felt dim and unprepared. Sure, I saw *Fake Omaha* on the signs when traveling to Lomax. The two places were in the same general direction, but I hadn't connected the dots. Lomax was the small city; Fake Omaha was the big city. They were all of 28 miles apart.

* * *

At the next month's meeting, I arrived a half-hour early to ensure I'd hear introductions. Yes, that was Cynthia Bayless. Yes, she had a new title with another entity: Executive Coordinator at MTA.

The meeting was uneventful and the day was rainy. No big lunch group came together. Another member of the taco detachment, Aaron Montoya Flynn, managed to round up three people for a quick bite: him, Cynthia, me.

We puddle-jumped across Court Street to Pho 249, a new Vietnamese noodle shop in one of those cast-iron storefronts. As soon as we sat down, Aaron stood back up. He spotted the owners and went to say hi. Aaron was a city councilperson in Lomax. He had been at the restaurant's grand opening a few weeks prior.

For a minute at the table, it was just Cynthia and me. I might as well ask if, by some long odds, she remembered me from the feedback session years earlier.

“I don’t remember you.”

That took care of that. Her reply was frank though not rude. Still, her usual enthusiasm was running low.

Aaron returned. We ordered lunch and, out of nowhere, Cynthia started to unload. “We are failing,” she said flatly. “We are already failing and we’re failing again. We’re always failing. I am tired of failing. No more failing. How do we stop failing?”

MTA – Metropolitan Transit Authority – was an evolved take on FORTA. A state law had reconfigured the organization. The transition included Cynthia, but – as she made abundantly clear – she was skeptical that anything would change. She rattled off a list of early flubs.

Cynthia and Aaron had worked together before. Aaron was the de facto champion of public transit in Lomax and, by extension, all of Ogden County. He was versed in many of the episodes that Cynthia referenced. I listened along, though most of their conversation went over my head. I zoned out briefly. I tore off a basil leaf and swirled it into my soup.

When I resumed listening, Cynthia was at the tail end of a gripe. “We just aren’t getting the right answers.”

I pierced in. “Are you asking the right questions?”

That shifted the energy. We all sat up straighter. Cynthia squinted hard at me, hard at Aaron. *Game on*, her expression taunted. Sounding recharged, she said, “I got a job for you two.”

What? We both *had* jobs.

“Well, not a *job* job. I can’t pay you,” she continued. “My board, half of them are totally checked out. The other half is trying, at least kind of. I think they want to improve things in a big sense, but they don’t know where they’re going. I mean, they don’t even know what they’re starting with. My vice chair wants me to set up a *current conditions committee*.”

It was a vague mandate and Cynthia had latitude to do it her way. Her idea had two main components: first, dig into the transit situation from multiple angles. The committee would enlist a cross-section of people who touched the transit system. People, say, like Aaron and me.

Second – and more important – hit the field. Explore what was

working and what wasn't. Learn what was on the minds of customers and employees and administrators – outside the format of a meeting built for complaints. Where appropriate, play the MTA card and peek behind the scenes of a live transit operation.

From this scattered research, the committee would inform the full MTA board. It would be “the right level of technical,” as Cynthia envisioned. Accessible enough for people who were not experts; specific enough to motivate better leadership.

Aaron was accountable to his voters in Lomax. He was hearing more and more concerns about transportation. From his own standpoint, he wanted a new outlet to pursue the matter. In his view, efforts around transit leaned too much into policy – many layers removed from anyone's daily commute. Cynthia's committee would bring him closer to the action. He accepted her offer on the spot.

My circumstances were different. Marsico & Thakar sent me to Lomax with one dispassionate task: take pictures of sidewalks. Larger, stickier issues from Fake Omaha did not figure into it. I motioned to excuse myself from Cynthia's job. “I don't know anything about public transit.”

“Yes you do. You ask good questions and that already puts you ahead of my dopey board. Plus you've actually been on the bus.”

“Maybe. But I'm not even from here.”

“Even better,” she retorted. “We could use an outside perspective.”

One last try. “I'm here on a job. I need to take pictures. I won't have time.”

Cynthia huffed. The committee would amount to an hour here, an hour there, with ample flexibility. I could make it work if I managed my obligations carefully. And that was on me. She wasn't going to spend any more time convincing me. Take it or leave it.

Now Aaron peered at me. We barely knew each other, but his face said, *you and I both agreed to the terms of this impromptu lunch meeting: we'd sign up for Team Cynthia.*

I drew in a breath and half-closed my eyes. I saw Shiwani Thakar on one shoulder, Sam Pratt on the other. I wasn't sure who was devil and who was angel. To join Cynthia's freeform project, there'd be a

solid *pass* from Sam. Then again, every two weeks, there was a solid *paycheck* from Shiwani.

My future career flashed before me. It was a bubbling cauldron of gray areas and judgment calls. If I could trust myself to dodge serious conflicts of interest, I could take the occasional leap of faith. Especially if it helped me to understand more – and to *do* more. I met Cynthia’s impatient stare and channelled Sam Pratt himself. “OK. Let’s do.”

DRAFT

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