

Silk Road and the Dark Web

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Entertainment

Midnight Facts for Insomniacs

Podcast Transcript

(Note: transcript consists of episode outline)

We've covered this briefly in the past, but there's a difference between the deep web and the dark web. For this episode I listened to a podcast that mostly consisted of a summary of a great book that I had also read and which I highly recommend called *American Kingpin: The Epic Hunt for the Criminal Mastermind Behind the Silk Road*. The host of this podcast was very confused about the difference between deep and dark, and it bothered me to no end. I was super triggered listening to this podcast. I get it, words are hard, but they do matter. I'm so anal. But these are significant differences. Because the Deep Web refers to the areas of the Internet that aren't publicly available, that aren't indexed by standard search engines. If you log into an email provider, your Netflix account, your bank to check your balance, the settings for your Facebook page, a corporate database, any type of portal for an organization,

all of that qualifies as the deep web. The deep web is anything that you can't access simply via googling or a direct link, which means that what we think of as the regular web is comparatively tiny. In fact, the deep web is estimated to be some 500 times larger than the standard web. The dark web, on the other hand, is a subset of the deep web that can only be accessed via special tools like the TOR browser. Which we will cover soon. Unlike the massive Deep Web, the Dark Web itself makes up just a small fraction of the Internet. And the defining characteristic of the dark web is anonymity. When you use special tools or a specific browser to access to the Dark Web, your goal is to mask your identity and conceal your online activity from anyone who might be watching or tracking, whether that be law enforcement, the government, corporations, or even a nosy roommate or family member.

Ross Ulbricht was born in 1984 and raised in Austin Texas. His parents were relatively well off, they owned and operated property in Costa Rica, which provided their primary income, and Ulbricht lived a privilege life, traveling extensively. He attended the University of Dallas on a full scholarship and graduated with a degree in physics in 2006. He proposed to his girlfriend at the time. She thanked him for the offer but explained that she'd been seeing other people and graciously declined. I don't know if it was gracious or not, actually.

Maybe she was like, "Nah. I'm good. Thanks for the offer but I'll just keep boning hot dudes." Maybe she was super mean but at least she didn't lead him on. I don't have a lot of sympathy for guys who pop the question and get turned down, because as far as I'm concerned a marriage proposal shouldn't be a leap of faith. If you're not 100% sure that this person wants to spend their life with you, chill, have a snack, sleep on it. The words marriage and spontaneous should never be linked. That applies to the proposal AND the ceremony. Ross seemed a bit lost after his declined proposal. He tried out for the amazing race with his sister and was rejected all over again. That has to sting. Rejected by a girlfriend, and then by a race. Two for two. Rejected by an inanimate object. Not even an object, an activity. So instead of pursuing his reality TV dreams he settled for attending Penn State on yet another full scholarship where he pursued a graduate degree in engineering and crystallography, working on solar cells etc. Probably a better choice. Ross was a smart dude. But he wouldn't ever use his degree in any meaningful way...he gave up on studying crystalline structures immediately after college. As is the case with so many scientists and new-age cult members, Crystals were just a phase. It seems like the only thing Ross acquired at Penn State was a deeply shitty belief system. Like many smart privileged white dudes, he became increasingly libertarian and

obsessed with the idea of personal freedom and unfettered capitalism. This is something you see frequently: I think I'm pretty far from a typical social justice warrior, but at the same time there are some really obvious truths that I have to face because I'm a privileged white guy myself. People like Ulbricht, who are intelligent but also lucky, often become convinced that America is 100% a meritocracy. We talked about this in our taxes episode, and also weird psychology. Because we all want to believe that we are responsible for our intelligence and success, rather than recognizing that it all comes down to the luck of genetics and circumstance. Smart, attractive, privileged people can't comprehend the possibility that the world might not function the same for everyone, and that we need to create some regulations that will level the playing field. For Ulbricht the world functioned according to a set of fair, simple, consistent rules. As far as he was concerned, the world worked the way it was supposed to. This is also really common among science-oriented people. A mathematician is so enamored with mathematical certainty that he/she is unable to account for—or possibly even conceive of—systems that are inherently unfair and illogical. They think *I'm a smart guy, I worked hard, I earned scholarships, so anyone who works hard can do the same*. This is a constant refrain you hear from the so-called intellectual dark web, the Jordan Petersons of the world: we must guarantee equal opportunity but

not equal outcome. The problem is that equal opportunity is a myth, and there will never BE true equality of opportunity, because we're born with different genetics and different circumstances, and outcomes are skewed based on innumerable factors that are outside of an individual's control. So while we can't make everyone equal, we have to make sure that we take care of and the people who are less fortunate, we have to make sure that no one slips through the cracks. And while it's true that a few exceptional individuals in the right circumstances are able to pull themselves up by their bootstraps, far too many others are born with lead shoes.

So Ulbricht became increasingly radicalized, he began referring to the government only as "the thieves." You know, because they steal your money in the form of taxes and use it for liberal handouts like roads and bridges and fire departments and medical care for old people and the entire US military. But Ross's anger toward the government was especially severe in the arena of drug enforcement. Because Ross... enjoyed drugs. The government is always being a real bitch when the thing they're banning is a thing that you happen to personally enjoy. One thing I really enjoy is throwing water balloons full of urine at random strangers on the street. But of course the man is always keeping me down. Although frankly I agree with Ross when it comes to the so/-called

war on drugs, and this is another topic we've covered extensively. I don't do ANY drugs, I don't even drink alcohol, but the war on drugs has been a massive failure. So Ross dreamed of sticking it to the government by creating a website for the drug trade. And that's part of the conundrum when it comes to Ulbricht, it's hard to tell whether Ross really cared about freedom or if like so many on the right, he just wanted to stick it to liberals and the man. Regardless, he became enamored with the idea of teaching the fascist US government a lesson by getting all of its citizens wasted on cocaine and hallucinogens.

Unfortunately for Ross, a drug selling website didn't seem feasible at the time, so he bided his time running an online bookstore called Good Wagon Books. An online used bookstore based out of a giant warehouse...super original idea. But good wagon books wasn't growing at a Bezos clip, and Ross became increasingly desperate to get his drug deal on, and that's when he learned about a technology known at the time as The Onion Router. TOR, T-O-R, is open source technology that was created in the 90s by the US military and is now publicly available. And by the way the fact that it's open source is especially important, because that means that if any nefarious entity or government organization tries to mess with the code or insert some type of vulnerability or back door, anyone can see it and raise the alarm. The word onion is meant to invoke the many

layers of security, all of the extra routing that ensures anonymity by masking the origin of a datapacket. The Technology works somewhat differently these days than it used to, but the original idea is that the TOR browser sets up its own network; it uses specific volunteer computers as nodes, and routes traffic through those specific computers. And every piece of information is bundled within multiple layers of encryption. So this will be an oversimplified explanation of the way the onion router worked when the silk road was created, but it will give you a good idea of what we're talking about: let's say you want to send an encrypted message over TOR. When you click send, the TOR technology quickly determines the path your information is going to take, and wraps your message up in a spiderweb of layered encryption, like an onion with your message at the center. So it's like a spiderweb onion. I should probably pick an analogy. Each of the nodes on the message's path is only capable of decrypting the one specific layer that was assigned to it. So your message moves to the first node—and remember these nodes are just individual computers—and that first computer decrypts the first layer of information, which reveals the next node in the chain. Now the computer knows which node in the chain to send message to. The node knows. But watch out the Noid. The noid knows nodes. So this second stop on the route sends the message forward, and the next node follows the same

procedure. So to recap, the nodes have a limited amount of information: they know that this message came to them from a specific previous node, but they can only see one step backwards in the chain, and they can only strip away one layer of the onion. at any time During the journey, each computer on the path is only aware of the previous node and the next node, but none of them know where the message came from or where it's going. So if the message were intercepted, there would be no way to determine its sender or recipient. And the message continues on its path, with more layers being stripped away, until the message reaches its destination and the final layer of encryption is removed, allowing the receiver to access the message at the delicious center of that onion. Once again the metaphor kind of falls apart.

So with the onion router Ross Ulbricht had found a solution for the problem of anonymity when browsing the web and communicating with potential buyers and dealers. The next issue to tackle was payment. It doesn't matter how anonymous you are when browsing the heroin store, if you have to purchase all of your smack via a credit card that is tied to your name, address, and Social Security number. "I would like three heroins please, ship it first class mail to John Smith at 187 Arrest Me drive." Enter bitcoin. We have a great episode on bitcoin, I think it's one of our best just because I feel like it gives a super comprehensive

view of the history and science behind cryptocurrency. I highly recommend you check that one out and then come back to this episode. But the bottom line is that the onion router and bitcoin were the secret-sauce combo that made the silk road happen. For all of the supposed genius of Ross Ulbricht, all he really did in 2010 was leverage two existing technologies, and he didn't even use them in a particularly novel way, because there were other wannabe digital Tony Montanas already hawking drugs via TOR. It's just that Ulbricht's platform was more ambitious, and took off before anyone else's. It would eventually become a sensation partly due to the negative media coverage. Every newspaper article raising the alarm about the silk road also drove new potential buyers to the dark web. But to give Ross his due, there were plenty of challenges that came with creating a digital marketplace on the dark web, and if you think about it, he had to do it completely by himself. It's not like he could post an ad on LinkedIn. *Seeking computer engineer for massive online criminal enterprise. Must have at least two years experience with a comparable drug cartel or midsize syndicate. Snitches and informants need not apply. Disclaimer: for legal purposes, this post is a practical joke. Unless you are a drug-loving anti-government computer engineer. Then it's real. Kidding. But seriously.* Ross actually did end up reaching out to an old college friend named

Richard Bates to help with some of the coding for what he described as a "secret site." How strange to help out a buddy and later find out that you contributed to building America's largest drug syndicate. Oops.

So the silk road was built on a foundation of shit. To be more specific: cow shit, and to be even MORE specific, the silk road was built on the mushrooms that grow on cow shit. Since Ross didn't have access to any actual drugs nor any drug dealers for his site, he bought a book called—and I'm not making this up—"The Construction and Operation of Clandestine Drug Laboratories," which provided instructions for setting up a large indoor magic mushroom farm. Yes, you can buy "Drug dealing for dummies." Dummies are very well catered to in American society. If you self-identify as a dummy, there are so many people who want to help you learn about the stock market or whatever. Although I think if you self-identify as a dummy, maybe stay out of the stock market and also drug dealing. Get into politics. So Ross invested 17,000 dollars to get his mushroom farm up and running in a big warehouse packed with long wooden shelves. Keep in mind that he was doing this in Texas, where the drug laws are borderline Orwellian. The punishment at the time was up to 99 years for a few hundred grams of mushrooms...Ross's first harvest would be around a hundred pounds. There are a lot of people who have tried to

justify what Ulbricht created, and his role in the running of the site, painting the attempted murders (teaser) as the product of an unstoppable freight train that Ross hadn't anticipated and couldn't stop, but I think it's important to understand that Ross knew exactly what he was getting into, he didn't just start as a some innocent nerdy coder. He dove into online criminality right off the bat as a large volume drug dealer. Maybe magic mushrooms seem harmless, but I can assure you that they're not. They CAN be fun and mind expanding or whatever if taken in the right dosage in controlled settings, but hallucinogens can also be incredibly dangerous. Fucking with the integrity of your brain is scary. Trust me, I know from experience. And Ross was fully aware that he'd be selling powerful hallucinogens anonymously to anyone on the Internet with a couple of spare bitcoin. There were no age requirements; no one was checking IDs on the silk road. By January 2011 Ross had harvested and tested his product—for quality control, of course, very important. It's like you know how when you're baking cookies and you taste the batter to make sure that it's delicious and then you hallucinate for seven hours straight? Doing mushrooms is just volunteering to experience temporary insanity. It really IS temporary insanity. Think about it. If you were running naked through the woods yelling at bubblegum butterflies or whatever 100% of the time, you'd be certifiably insane. The only difference with

mushrooms is that it goes away. That's how drugs should be marketed: Want to go just a little bit insane tonight? Try LSD. Want to poison your brain just a smidge? Mushrooms.

Ross finally launched the Silk Road in February 2011. And oh btw, as soon as the site went live he told his gf Julia everything. This confession wouldn't be his downfall but it does indicate the level of super criminal mastermind we're talking about here. So far he had already leaked incriminating info to his college buddy and his gf and the website hadn't been live for 24 hours. Within weeks Ross would find that he needed even more help from Richard, and would confess *everything* to his friend as well.

From week one the Silk Road began to grow at an unprecedented rate, faster than any Internet unicorn startup, but it was initially barebones operation on every level. When it first launched, the site was as basic as a Britney Spears playlist. If you wanted to find some drugs, there was literally a big green link on the Silk Road that said—I kid you not—"drugs." And then there were subcategories, and under hallucinogens you would find the only product currently available, Ross's mushrooms. To spread the word about the site and drive traffic to the dark web, Ross had registered anonymously for a bunch of drug forums and posted under different pseudonyms with quips like, "What an awesome thread! You guys have a ton of great ideas. Has anyone seen the

Silk Road yet?" Subtle. We should do that for the podcast. "You podcast fans on this random forum are super cool! Have you listened to MFFI? It's the best! Take it from me: Thane Modgers." So Ross Ulbricht posted on a bunch of different forums under a bunch of different pseudonyms including a forum called the Shroomery using the pseudonym "Altoid." Make note of that. But his anonymous posts seemed to work, and both clients and drug dealers began to migrate to the site.

One idea that Ross didn't come up with but (like so many of his ideas) was smart enough to steal, was the concept of allowing purchasers to leave eBay-style reviews for drug dealers. Reviews determined the seller's score, known as karma points, which is interesting verbiage. Not sure how well this worked out. Latest review: "I Purchased two kilos of black tar heroin from 'ShadySmackFiend5000.' It killed two of my friends and also a hamster who randomly sniffed the bag. Minus two karma points. Plus one karma point for fast delivery. This guys' drugs will immediately stop your heart but on the other hand they'll arrive super fast, so...mixed bag." Actually, karma was probably an appropriate name for a supposed system of accountability that has no real world repercussions. Karma doesn't work. Did I make that clear? There are far too many terrible people prospering in this world. So Ross's random spam posts generated some traffic, but the real

tsunami of publicity didn't kick off until a Gawker reporter got wind of the site and began corresponding with Ross for an upcoming article. The article would eventually be published under the title *The underground website where you can buy any drug imaginable*, and it began with this infamous quote: "Making small talk with your pot dealer sucks. Buying cocaine can get you shot. What if you could buy and sell drugs online like books or light bulbs? Now you can: Welcome to Silk Road."

The response to the article was overwhelming, in every sense of the word. Obviously it drove a ton of traffic to the site, but it also drove plenty of the wrong kind of traffic: law-enforcement and politicians had taken notice. Senator Chuck Schumer gave an entire speech about the Silk Road to members of the press, in which he noted how terrible it was that you could purchase drugs like cannabis and "ecstasies" online. Ecstasies. You CAN purchase ecstasies online, but those are different sites. I think you can get that on craigslist.

Anyway, Julia was shocked to find that Ross's little online hobby had become a national scandal, and the sudden media spotlight put pressure on the relationship. Soon they were constantly fighting: Julia would demand Ross shut down the site, he would refuse. She was particularly alarmed by the expansion of the Silk

Road from mushrooms into other illegal areas: hardcore drugs like heroin, designer drugs, and guns. What possible good reason could someone have for buying a gun anonymously, she asked? What happened if a kid ODD on heroin or some crazy ass horse tranquilizer purchased on the site? Ross always had an answer steeped in libertarian rhetoric: he'd point out that the site had implemented a rating system so that drug dealers would be incentivized to sell quality product, and she'd respond, "how are they going to give someone a bad rating if they're dead?" Solid point. Even if you're not dead, as we mentioned before, is that something you're gonna be thinking about in the hospital after an OD or a bad trip? *Once my liver starts functioning properly and I get released from the ICU I'm going to give that anonymous heroin dealer a sternly worded review.* Julia also expressed her fears for Ross's safety and for his future, warning him: "You're going to end up in jail for the rest of your life." ding ding ding. We have a winner. Ross would blow her off, explaining that he was protected by the magical anonymity of TOR and Bitcoin. Neither of which he had created nor fully understood. Meanwhile, his own coding limitations on the Silk Road were being becoming painfully apparent. With the gawker article and the Chuck Shumer effect resulting in a flood of new users, some of the site's inherent weaknesses were suddenly exposed: the many and

varied coding mistakes Ross had unintentionally woven into the fabric of the Silk Road began to spring up like leaks in the pirate ship, and he spent entire days putting out metaphorical fires at his computer, often without showering for weeks on end, and frequently sitting at the computer naked. Always a good sign for your mental health, when you cease bathing and wearing clothes.

Stressed and fed up, Julia eventually confessed everything to her friend Erica. Doh. She then broke up with Ross. Double doh. Then, Erica had a bad trip on acid that she had bought from the Silk Road. Doh Doh Doh. The three of them eventually had a blowup, a big argument which culminated in Erica posting a message on Ross's Facebook: "I'm sure the authorities would like to know about Ross Ulbricht's drug website."

This should have been the come-to-Jesus moment. Ross quickly deleted the post, but he should have immediately realized how tenuous his empire truly was. He had created a precarious house of digital cards and the entire structure was one facebook post away from tumbling down. Ross did realize that he needed to make some significant life changes. He didn't quit the Silk Road and he didn't reform the site, but he did flee to Australia to live with his sister. Baby steps.

So It was kind of like he and his sister were collaborating on an amazing race after all, except way less fun and with way worse potential

consequences. Running from law enforcement is indeed an Amazing Race. In Australia Ross found some peace and serenity. He began meditating, and showering occasionally. He also doubled down on the site. He began corresponding with some of the most successful dealers on the Silk Road, including a former prisoner and hardened criminal who went by the name Variety Jones. VJ would become Ross's right-hand man, and at one point he would remind Ross that what they were doing fell under American "kingpin" laws, which could qualify perpetrator for the death penalty. Ross's response:

"Balls to the wall and all in my friend.

" VJ suggested that Ross—who had been going by the moniker Silk Road or admin, adopt a new persona, one that would rally the troops and convey a sense of danger with a tongue in cheek roguishness. He told Ross to call himself the Dread Pirate Roberts.. What do you know about the DPR?

As the site grew at a staggering pace, and Ross's bank account swelled into the millions, stresses began to mount even more. Ross created graphs to illustrate the state of the site's financials and couldn't believe the exponential growth. Every line on every graph was up and to the right. Ross was now a multimillionaire running a corporation by himself without an HR department or accounting department or even a secretary. But he had employed a few admins, and he had VJ. Still, the stress was getting to him. He began chewing

his fingernails from anxiety, and reduced his cuticles to ragged bloody shreds. There were constant crises to contend with, constant problems with buggy code, constant hacking attacks and missing Bitcoin and squabbles among the drug dealers, and hanging over it all the ultimate threat of exposure and incarceration. Who could he trust? Everyone on the site was anonymous, everyone was lying to protect themselves.

And there was nowhere to hide. The website was operating internationally, which meant Ross was a wanted fugitive in almost every country on earth.

He had set the silk road in motion, and it was snowballing. But despite the illegal nature of the business, it still WAS, fundamentally, a for-profit business. At one point Ross even engineered a version of Amazon Prime Day, on 4/20 of course, offering deep discounts on drugs just like the discounts on Black Friday tv sales. It's OD day! I realize you're a struggling junkie who came to the site looking for a modest amount of heroin to feed your spiraling addiction, but have you considered instead a fatal dose? We would like to suggest that you purchase an unreasonable amount of drugs.

For anyone who idolizes this guy, and a lot of people do—you might be surprised how popular this dude and his ideology are—he was by now allowing guns, poisons, date rape drugs, and explosives to anyone who happened to have enough bitcoin.

When one of the administrators contacted him, alarmed because a seller was offering human kidneys and livers, Ross's response was, "As long as the source consents, then it's OK. Morals are easy when you understand the nonaggression principle." Which is exactly the kind of "freedom above all" bullshit I despise. No one consents to sell their liver on a black market website, and if they do, it's because they're so desperate for money that it would be a farce to call it consent. That's why sex trafficking is illegal... even if a woman consents to be sexually exploited, she's consenting out of desperation. People say yes to a lot of things they don't want to do, and that's why we've created laws to determine when consent is the result of coercion. Laws and regulations are the reason we don't have children working in mines for eight hours a day, or using their tiny fingers to clean out the gears of giant machines. Laws and regulations are the reason that corporations aren't allowed to quietly pour poison into the groundwater without your knowledge. And libertarians will tell you that those types of things aren't allowed in their worldview because they harm other people, and that they simply want to legalize any activity or action that doesn't hurt anyone else. But that's subjective. even if my action doesn't directly harm another person, that doesn't mean that all of my actions should be allowed. If I choose not to buy health insurance and then drive without a seatbelt, that's my decision,

but society pays the cost when I go to the emergency room and can't afford to pay my bills. And let's take it even further. Elephants are endangered. But maybe I like to hunt elephants, and my hunting elephants doesn't directly hurt other humans. But there are laws against hunting endangered animals because we as a society have acknowledged but there is a benefit to biodiversity that isn't necessarily quantifiable. Laws aren't evil; human nature is. We need laws to curb our worst impulses. I'm getting off my soap box but no promises that I won't climb back on. Because fuck this guy.

Despite his staunch "freedom is king" stance, Ross did create rules for the site, and Ross's rules were as simple as they were hypocritical and inconsistent. No child pornography, no assassinations, no stolen personal information, because Ross's libertarian viewpoint was encapsulated by the slogan "mind your own business and don't bother or harm other people." Yet he allowed the purchase of untraceable guns that could be used to harm other people, along with deadly poisons like cyanide, and hacking tools that were built to steal people's personal information. Did I mention fuck this guy?

Around this time the site became the target of an only loosely coordinated but intense law enforcement campaign involving various agencies, from the FBI to the DEA to the IRS. This was

when a user calling himself Nob began reaching out to the Dread Pirate Roberts, claiming he was a big-time drug smuggler who was interested in buying the site. In reality Nob was a DEA agent named Carl Force—remember that name (could anyone forget that name?). Ross declined, but the two began corresponding regularly. Nob frequently complained to dread pirate Roberts about the “small fry” nature of most drug transactions on the site, and offered to prove his bonafides via a large cocaine transaction. DPR put him in touch with one of the administrators of the site, known by his moniker “chronicpain,” and the three began negotiating the deal. At which point ChronicPain gave the agent his actual goddamn home address. Chronicpain was quickly and quietly apprehended, and turned out to be a 47-year-old family man named Curtis Clark Green, and this regular ass dude had administrator access to the site which allowed him to retrieve and move around bitcoins from the site. Within days, a Bitcoin account to which Curtis had access was suddenly drained of \$300,000. DPR panicked. He contacted Nob, aka agent Carl force, who claimed that Green had also made off with his cocaine. DPR found the record of Curtis’s arrest, and began to suspect that chronicpain had gone rogue and was stealing money and drugs while working for the feds. Dread Pirate Roberts asked Nob to intimidate green. He wanted green beaten senseless, and he wanted photographic proof. At least, that was

his first request. But then his trusty old twisted version of whatever passes for a libertarian moral compass kicked in. He remembered how he had once argued in college for the right of any man to defend his home or property with violence. In Ross's mind, both his safety and property had been compromised. The strongest possible reaction was justified. After all, if he allowed Curtis Greene to get away with just a slap on the wrist or the face or skull etc, wouldn't he ultimately be undermining his own status as ruthless leader of a drug cartel? He needed to make an example of Curtis green. Green needed to die. Little did Ross know that the man he was asking and eventually paying to authorize the hit on Curtis green—Nob, aka agent Carl Force—was at that very moment sitting in an interrogation room across from Curtis Green. Carl was initially shocked to learn from DPR that Curtis had been gutsy enough to steal from the Silk Road, confounded by the idea that the chubby, pasty ex Mormon sitting across from him would have had the sheer cojones to steal from the dread pirate roberts. Equally shocked was Curtis himself. Because Curtis hadn't stolen anything, and the real perpetrator would only be unmasked in the aftermath of the silk Road's downfall. The real perpetrator was in fact the other man in the room that day with Carl Force and Curtis Greene. His name was agent Shaun Bridges, and he had used Carl's login info to siphon off hundreds of thousands of dollars of Bitcoin. But in

the meantime Carl Force (all I can think of is Carlos danger. Carl Danger wiener Force) decided to take advantage of dread pirate Roberts furious anger...he desired great vengeance and furious anger (furious anger is redundant—I'm angry and also very angry) by staging a murder. Agents Carl and Shaun convinced the very reluctant Curtis Green to let them improvise a torture scene, and then a murder. Curtis was taken to a hotel and filmed while police officers who were acting as hit men repeatedly and violently forced his head under water in the bathtub. Agent Shaun didn't stick around for the torture scene...he excused himself, not due to an attack of conscience, but so that he could log on once again into Curtis's account and siphon away even more Bitcoin while Curtis sputtered and cried and pleaded through an ordeal that amounted to an inverted water boarding. The cops finally took a photo of Curtis playing dead, with fake blood and vomit leaking from his mouth, and sent it to DPR as evidence of the successful hit. Ross kept the photo. Over the following months Carl danger wiener force became increasingly close to DPR, and eventually offered to put him in touch with what he described as a corrupt, rogue agent" who could give Ross information from the inside of the investigation. Carl then deleted those portions of the chat from the official DEA logs, and moved to an encrypted channel. And in this new, invisible channel, inaccessible to the Feds, Carl

began feeding Ross genuine information about the Case. He revealed that the authorities had taken advantage of sloppy coding to locate the official silk road servers in Iceland. Detectives hadn't been able to recover any identifiable info, but they had learned that the server was dubbed "frosty," and they were closer to DPR than they had ever been. Ross began paying Carl for information, transferring large sum of money to his encrypted accounts. Agent Carl Force had now officially become double-agent Nob. Both Shaun bridges and Carl force would eventually plead guilty to stealing a combined total of almost 1.5 million worth of bitcoin and would both receive prison sentences of less than a decade each. Pretty much everyone in this story sucks. Even Julia...how did she manage to not end up in jail, btw? She knew the whole time, and never turned him in.

Meanwhile, dread pirate Roberts was fighting new digital battles on almost every front. hackers attempted to extort Ulbricht with compromising information, threatening to dox members of the site, which would potentially have a chilling effect on both the dealers and customers and potentially lead to a mass exodus. Ulbricht, spiraling into paranoia and increasingly absorbed by this new persona of the Dread Pirate Robert's, would pay over 700,000 for additional assassinations that he arranged through intermediaries, targeting at least four other members of the Silk

Road who had run afoul of DPR. It was later discovered that none of these hits actually came to fruition. Just like the feds had done, the supposed hitmen staged the assassinations to separate this wannabe cartel leader from his money. Ross was a sucker. But that doesn't change the fact that he was a sucker who believed he had arranged the assassination of five people. Interesting interpretation of libertarian philosophy.

You might be wondering how the Feds have so much detail about these purported contract killings. That's because Ross kept detailed journals. He believed himself to be a freedom fighter, he believed that the site was going to grow so big that the government would eventually surrender, Ross would defeat the war on drugs, narcotics would be legalized, and Ross would emerge from the shadows victorious, a hero of the common people. So of course he had to record his every thought and action, for posterity. For future generations of his adoring fans. I think Ross was consuming too much of his own product by this point. That's the mushrooms talking.

What ultimately brought down the Dread Pirate Roberts was not any of the sophisticated sting operations, but a Google search. Independent of the FBI or DEA or any of the other premier law enforcement agencies, IRS Agent Gary Alford began googling for any

references to the silk road that had taken place before the site actually launched. He didn't find much, except a few random posts on a few random forums under a few different usernames. one of the posts was on a forum called the Shroomery by a user named Altoid. Alford googled the username in the TOR format: silkroad.onion.altoid. Which led him to yet another post with a similar format: Altoid once again gushing about the silk road and encouraging people to visit. The detective was able to track down the email address used to register the Altoid

account: frosty@frosty.com.

Remember the name of the Iceland server? When the detective dug even further he learned that the email address had been modified... Before changing the address to frosty, Altoid had original he been registered under the email RossUlrbrecht@gmail.com.

When Carl Danger Weiner Force learned that the feds were closing in on Dread pirate Robertsm he immediately realized that he was in extreme danger wiener. He had deleted all of his encrypted chats with dread pirate Roberts, but he had no guarantee that DPR had done the same on his end. If the feds seized dread pirate Roberts laptop, there was a good chance that Carl's goose was cooked. He began frantically contacting other departments, demanding access to his Iceland server, hoping to remotely destroy any evidence of complicity.

But the feds were moving quickly.

They had set up 24 hour surveillance on Ross, and they were able to verify that as Ross signed into his laptop and signed out, all of those logins coincided with the comings and goings of the Dread pirate Roberts on the silk road. They had their man...now they just needed to catch him red handed. And they knew at the laptop was the key. They correctly guessed that Ross had programmed a Killswitch for his laptop, a simple way of shutting it down and encrypting all of the information with a single keystroke.

Any attempt to prosecute Ross without the data on the laptop would result in a case based on nothing but circumstantial evidence. They needed to get the laptop when it was open, active, and logged into the admin area of the silk road. And they needed to do it without allowing Ross to nuke the evidence with a single keystroke.

On October 1, 2013 Ross sat down in a library, opened his laptop, and logged onto the Silk Road. He heard a woman curse loudly behind him, and turned, startled, to witness a violent domestic disturbance: a man had his first cocked, preparing to strike a slim Asian woman beside him. When Ross glanced instinctively back at his laptop, it was gone. And suddenly the arguing couple apparently put their differences aside and United in a common goal. They leapt at Ross, subdued him within moments, and placed him under arrest.

Ross remained calm and collected during the booking process. He

demanded a lawyer, confident that his laptop was secure and that he would beat the charges. Even if the cops could prove that he was logged into the site, it didn't prove that he was the only person acting as DPR. He was sure the feds wouldn't be able to break into the rest of his incriminating files. He had encrypted the contents of the laptop with his super secure password "purple orange beach."

"Genius! Three words, no letters, no punctuation, no special characters. You know what they say about the first rule of computer security: make sure your password is a short and simple descriptive phrase. But it turned out the FBI didn't even need to bruteforce Ross's super secure two-adjectives-and-a-noun passcode. They were able to retrieve his password from the laptop's ram and the computer spilled the vast majority of its contents. The Dread Pirate Robert's diaries, chat logs with the admins, encrypted file folders containing pictures of his supposed victims, spreadsheets detailing the finances of the silk road. It was all there. I should pause again to acknowledge that there are lots of people who still believe Ross is innocent, people who have bought into the defense's theory that he was framed, that even though he admitted to founding the Silk Road in court he actually gave up ownership of the online marketplace before the attempted murder for hire plans were launched. Those people are stupid. For many reasons. First off, the evidence is ironclad. Second, if you

find yourself having trouble believing that Ross Ulbrecht could have ordered assassinations, why? I think you need to ask yourself a few questions. Is it because he's not the kind of person we think of when we think of a murderer, Or drug kingpin, Or cartel leader? Because he's upper middle class, privileged, smart, white? Most serial killers are middle class white guys. We know Ross aspired to and achieved his vision of becoming leader of one of the largest drug cartels that has ever existed. We know that the administrator of the silk road arranged what he thought were assassinations. Why wouldn't that person be Ross Ulbrecht, a man who spent years advocating a dog eat dog philosophy of ruthless, unfettered capitalism in which drugs and weapons and explosives are readily available regardless of who is on the other side of the keyboard, a man whose entire life was a lie? If you are looking for someone else to pin this on, someone more consistent with your idea of stereotypical criminal, that's a you problem. Ross is guilty as fuck. We can argue about whether his sentence was too harsh—and I'd agree that it was—but Ross was guilty af.

Ulbrecht was offered a plea deal of 10 years to life, which he promptly rejected. He was worried the judge might choose the latter. So instead, "After turning down the plea deal, Ross was officially charged with seven felonies...Count four was the most terrifying, even for Ross: a charge of running a continual criminal

enterprise. This was known as the "Kingpin Statute" and was reserved for the big boss of an organized criminal enterprise. While the kingpin charge carried a minimum of twenty years in jail and a maximum of life, if it was proved that the kingpin had murdered someone, the sentence could be upgraded to death."

The prosecution unveiled reams of damning chat logs, mountains of incriminating evidence, and paraded in front of the jury the families of drug purchasers who died due to ODing on hardcore narcotics from the Silk Road. It took the jury just three hours to find Ross Ulbricht guilty on all counts.

The issue of privilege would rear its head again during the sentencing. Judge Katherine Forrest "noted that the defense had presented research papers that argued that increased drug distribution could be morally better for society by reducing violence and encouraging the sale of better-quality and therefore safer drugs. By this Judge Forrest seemed incensed. It was as if Ross had been arguing that just because he had sold drugs from behind a computer, he was different."

"No drug dealer from the Bronx selling meth or heroin or crack has ever made these kinds of arguments to the Court," Judge Forrest said. "It is a privileged argument. You are no better a person than any other drug dealer,

and your education does not give you a special place of privilege in our criminal justice system." Preach.

Ross Ulbricht is serving life in prison with no possibility of parole.

A note on the downfall of Carl danger Weiner force. ""In one instance the FBI had found a message on the Silk Road servers that had been sent to the Dread Pirate Roberts from one of his alleged informants who was a mole inside the government. The plant went by the name "French Maid" and had been selling secrets to DPR for a hefty fee. But as the FBI started to look further, they noticed that one of the messages sent from French Maid to DPR was bizarrely signed "Carl." And then another message sent shortly afterward provided a clarification: "I am sorry about that. My name is Carla Sophia and I have many boyfriends and girlfriends on the market place."" That is feeble.

Carl and Shaun will be released next year.

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