

# OMG! Ponies!

By C. E. Woolen

Wharton Lundgren took the hand of his twenty-five year old son Joey and together they went to his favorite Science & Nature Museum. After sneaking into an improperly secured warfare research laboratory, Joey had been afflicted with a broad spectrum of neurological damage. The family received a settlement of one million dollars per week to be paid into a managed trust account. Since then, Joey had retreated into his own internal world, apparently with simple pleasures and no malice towards anyone. Together, father and son went first to the Dinosaur exhibit. Mr. Lundgren smiled ruefully how such a simple small town museum could keep one troubled young man free from distress in this complicated world.

"Stegosaurus!" hollered Joey.

"Yes, Joey, you are right. It eats Grass and lived in the muddy swamps."

"Grass. Mud!"

Mr. Lundgren smiled amiably and took his son to the gift shop to buy him a Stegosaurus t-shirt.

\*\*\*\*\*

"Gentlemen, this Homeland Security Task Force is called to order. Consultant Lundgren, will you please summarize the recent developments for us?"

"Yes, Mr. Director. Since Osama Bin Laden was defeated, all facets of the administration have been urged to speak up with clues pointing toward any increased Emerging Threat indicators. Some of my staff have suggested that we include China in our observations. So far there does not seem to be any hostile acts planned. However, under a different focus, we may be able to gain some Intel regarding Chinese censorship policy towards dissidents and activists. I am confident that this would be a valuable source of information in our overall Chinese policy."

"I agree, Consultant Lundgren. Please keep me informed of any resources you require."

"Yes, Mr. Director."

Joey Wharton attended the meetings with his father, usually sitting in the corner out of the way. After a review by Internal Services, he was not deemed to be a threat and the psychologists agreed that close proximity to his father was a reasonable accommodation towards his mental health in light of the source of his afflictions. He had his own inexpensive laptop with headphones, and he enjoyed watching videos on You Tube.

"Pony!"

This utterance earned a reflexive smile from his father and a couple of the officials, but otherwise produced no lasting disruption. Joey was a good son in his way, trying his best to behave during his father's Important Meetings. A couple of hours later, the officials adjourned for lunch, and Joey was left to himself, under the care of a Second Assistant. The relaxation in tension was a relief, and Joey wandered around the room, gazing raptly at the imposing meeting table with its various examples of Important Information. A topic had come up for discussion about what to do with differing versions of the same information from two separate sources of unequal truth value. It was suspected that in such cases, one version was relatively intact, while the other was a government-approved version modified to meet the Chinese government's own purposes. But how could they be told apart? It was decided that teams of analysts were to be assigned to the documents, and results would be reviewed in a subsequent meeting.

It had been an unusually long meeting, and Joey was exhausted after being on his best behavior for so long. To relieve his stress, he re-imagined the expansive table as a farm and "took his Ponies out to eat Grass". He placed his little plastic toys here and there in "perfect harmony" among the "patches of Grass" laid out over the mud-brown table. Joey knew it was Bad farming to "let Ponies eat Bad Grass", so he "only let his Ponies eat Good Grass". The Second Assistant looked on, but made no move. He had instructions to allow the son of the Security Consultant some leeway, and as long as no damage was evident, the troubled young man fared better when allowed some room to express himself.

When the officials filed back into the room, Joey had calmed down and was glad to see his father.

"Dad! Ponies!"

"I see them Joey. Tell me about them."

"See, Ponies! Ponies like Good Grass. Not Bad Grass."

Consultant Lundgren looked over the table with the array of plastic Ponies spread out over the papers.

"Good Grass and Bad Grass?"

"Farm." Joey waved a hand to indicate the table. "Mud." This was the earth-colored table between documents. "Grass."

These were the policy documents arranged in pairs under discussion by analysts. Joey's eyes took on a murky quality. "Dad, Bad people made some Grass Bad. Ponies hafta eat Good Grass!"

Family man Wharton Lundgren was just about to offer consoling fatherly encouragement to his son and help him pack up the farm diorama, when he happened to take a sharper look at just what was before his eyes. He whispered, "Oh My God. Ponies!?"

Consultant Lundgren straightened up and barked, "No one is to touch this table without further permission. Notify the President that his presence is requested immediately, code Cao Ni Ma. Second Assistants, please help Joey back to his corner and get him some lunch, anything he wants. Someone call Hasbro and say that we need a custom run of toy merchandise, prioritizing speed over six-sigma quality. The specs will be discussed with their team soon. For now, someone needs to go to a toy store and find a large package of plastic Ponies. Someone else needs to go to the Science and Nature Museum and pick up for Joey some t-shirts with a Stegosaurus on them, as many different designs as they have. Everyone else take fifteen minutes to attend to personal business and get ready for a long second half of this meeting."

The officials were startled, but they knew better to question orders given in that tone. Something interesting was afoot.

\*\*\*\*\*

An entourage arrived, including the President, a product manager from Hasbro, a Cryptography expert, and a Second Assistant with the package of plastic Ponies and Stegosaurus t-shirts. Joey had been helped back to his corner happily wearing a new Stegosaurus t-shirt and eating his lunch. Consultant Lundgren called the meeting back to order, with a mischievous gleam in his eyes.

"Gentlemen. Observe the tableau before you. Ponies!" He waited rhetorically for the seeming absurdity to sink in. "Okay, now let me restate this with more technical language. In the field of Communications Under Duress, texts are not what they seem. There is simultaneously less meaning, because of the force of oppression and censorship limiting what the author wishes to communicate, and more meaning, because the author encodes further subtext cues in an attempt to complete his true message. It is public knowledge that China is one such example of a national censorship policy."

Turning to the bewildering display of top secret documents and childlike toy animals, he continued. "Gentlemen, it is quietly known that my son has suffered immense damage due to his accident. However, it seems he might have gained something that should put to rest any doubts about the annuity settlement he receives. I would like to make it official that he be designated a Security Consultant, and that his funds be designated as Retainer Fees. Gentlemen, we have been discussing how to open the China angle for days. My son just cracked it wide open over a one hour lunch."

A few gasps of surprise spread despite the seriousness of the matters at hand. Wharton Lundgren never joked about official business, and only confined himself to small bits of melodramatic presentation. They listened eagerly for the denouement of his insight.

Lundgren resumed, "Somewhere mixed in with the heartbreaking loss of normal functions, my son picked up a heightened sense of pattern recognition. Until now, this was also obscured by an Aphasic-like loss of language appropriateness. Think of a computer that at its heart can only communicate in Assembly Code. These data streams are not naturally understandable by regular people; they require additional translation. Now consider the tableau before you. It was camouflaged by the childlike aspect of it all. That, gentlemen, is my point. Quick, free T-shirt to the first one to get the principle involved." His eyes sparkled as he looked around the room.

Frank from Cryptography raised his hand. Lundgren called on him. "Steganography, Mr. Lundgren?"

"Yes! Exactly! Free t-shirt of a Stegosaurus for him! You see gentlemen; my son has been visually encoding his input through pun-like visual-audio metaphors. My son surfs the web with only minimal emergency oversight, and no one completely understands him. Stegosaurus is a metaphor for "Steganography". The principle is "hiding something in plain sight", which means, "not Cryptographically encoded" which would stand out, but "Steganographically encoded", so it looks like something else. For all of you who tolerated his childlike utterances, you are forgiven - we all missed it."

The President spoke up. "I see some of where this is going. Are you saying that he is more aware of the concepts of these meetings than we gave him credit for?"

"Yes, Mr. President. No doubt he has plenty of problems from his accident, but he is not a "vegetable". I will go even further now, and speculate that he acquired savant-like abilities that could prove vital to National Security. The main reason we missed it, is that he has something like a 500 word vocabulary with childlike tendencies, and we dismissed his phrasing as overly simplistic. Joey, can you join us now? You can help your country! We need you!"

Joey looked up, startled. "What, Dad?"

"Joey, please tell the President about your Ponies and the Grass."

"Uh, yes, Dad. Hi, Mr. President, Sir. Um ... These are my Ponies. See, they are out on the farm." Joey waved a hand to indicate the table. "The brown areas are mud. Mud is dirty but it's okay. See, the Ponies like Grass. But look at the farm. There is some Bad Grass here. Ponies only like Good Grass."

The President looked puzzled. But Frank from Cryptography yelped, "Wait, is that what you are saying, Mr. Lundgren? Someone find us a laptop with speakers and an extra pair of headphones. I need to look at something." One of the Second Assistants left briskly to retrieve a laptop and speakers and headphones from Stores. He returned a few minutes later. The Cryptography expert went to You Tube and retrieved a couple of videos using the headphones, then looked up and changed the audio output to the speakers. "Joey, is this it?" He played the videos of the Grass Mud Horse and the Farm.

Joey perked up. "Yes! Ponies!"

Turning to the group, the Cryptography expert explained. "Mr. President, what Joey means is that he saw the videos of how some Chinese Bloggers defeated the Chinese Censorship using audio analogues of forbidden material. Because the videos featured homophonic audio analogues, the Chinese censorship software could not detect the forbidden words, but human listeners did. They recognized the intent, and quickly broadcast the material all over the world. "Grass Mud Horse" has an audio analogue of lewd words in Chinese. The concept describes "River Crabs" damaging the Grass. This is also an audio analogue of the Chinese governmental policy of "Harmony" or censorship."

The President pondered this, but held his tongue to wait for the rhetorical completeness of the final explanation.

Consultant and Family Man Wharton Lundgren concluded the revelation. "Exactly, Frank. Steganography. The art of hiding normal seeming materials in plain sight without suspicious "encrypted gobbledygook". According to the guys over in Psych, Joey has picked up a talent for something called "Semantic Equation Analysis". What that means is that he looked at our briefs at lightning speed, and detected the truer copy of each pair of documents. Instinctively, he knew when a censored version of the material "didn't add up". Let me give you a grossly overstated example to state the principle. 'Mr. Smith beat his wife. She was grateful and lived happily ever after'. Clearly there is something horribly wrong this this account. Yes, there is some psychology of abused women involved, but overall a ton of context is missing about how an abusive husband leads to matrimonial happiness. This is a very simple example of principle of "the meaning doesn't add up".

The President spoke up again. "Consultant Lundgren, are you saying that your son Joey might have real value in the Chinese Situation?"

"Yes, Mr. President. He might not fully understand what he is doing, or be able to explain his methods. But he used the terms "Bad Grass" and "Good Grass" to refer to these documents. Joey, can you come talk to the nice President again? He wants to know more about the Grass and the Ponies."

"Okay, Dad. Uh... Hi, Mr. President. Um... see, I know these are papers, not real Grass. But I like to think of them as Grass. Look here." Joey borrowed a pencil on the table. He drew a marking around a paragraph. "My Ponies like Grass. But this looks like Bad Grass. Eating Bad Grass will make my Ponies sick. Now look here." He marked a section of the other document. "This looks like Good Grass. My Ponies like it."

Frank from Cryptography chimed in. "Right. Mr. President, what Joey is saying is that he does not really think we are in a farm. He just sees the world through a highly abstract symbolic filter. He feels a little frustrated he cannot express what his brilliant insights tell him. Joey is saying that he looked at both versions of the communiqués that our Intel

forces have gathered, and one 'feels better' than the other. He is right with 70% accuracy without even knowing the global background context of the material. He noticed instantly when the meaning of certain copies simply didn't make sense. It's a binary distinction, but it's pretty good. With that as a lead, Cryptography should be able to make some major breakthroughs."

The President pondered this for a few moments. "I'm impressed. So far though, these were all done at lunch, so to remove all traces of doubt for the media, let's do some live. Do we have some other sets of communiqués from our sources separated into pairs like these here?"

The Second Assistants were a little lost up to this point, but they perked up. "Yes, Sir. We have three more that were not yet ready for the meeting. They might be ready now. We can go get them."

Consultant Lundgren replied, "Sure, please go retrieve those examples."

The Second Assistants left and returned shortly with three files of further paired examples. Family man Wharton Lundgren asked his son, "Joey? Do you have any more Ponies? We need you to tell us which Grass is Good."

"Oh, yeah Dad. Uh, I only have two Ponies left, and they are getting tired. Is that okay?"

"Yes, Joey. The President likes your Ponies. It's okay if one Pony is Bad and eats two patches of Grass, okay?"

"Okay Dad. Let's see which Grass they like."

The Second Assistants laid out the documents in orderly columns of three pairs of two. Joey looked at them. He borrowed a Pony from somewhere else and 'let them decide where to eat'. In about ten minutes he made his choices, and marked one paragraph of one of the documents and wrote 'Bad Grass!'

The President looked at these new exhibits. "China Desk, what is your opinion?"

The man with the China specialty spoke up. "Yes, Sir. Joey has somehow identified the key suppression of the labor conditions, which got worse in the Apple factories last month. The better version reports that the employees were asked to sign a "non-suicide" document. The censored version says, "The employees are happy and performing well to their quotas."

The President agreed. "I am impressed. Grant Joey special monitoring to protect him from inadvertent disclosure mistakes, but give him wider access than just You Tube and Wikipedia. Twice per week (depending on his health) he can let his Ponies "decide which Grass they like". Consultant Lundgren and Frank from Cryptography will lead the interpretation team. Hasbro will produce a custom line of Ponies for this initiative, which

may enable us to gain further granular detail, based on Joey's abilities. I am pleased, everyone. This is good work. Please wrap up and then this meeting is adjourned." The President left.

There was a flurry of administrative details to be handled after the President left. The product manager from Hasbro promised to call midweek to make a line of twelve Ponies in lots of 100 each for the project.

Family Man Wharton Lundgren hugged Joey. "Joey! You served your country today! Can you do that twice a week? The President likes your Ponies!"

"Oh, Dad! Really!? The President!? Yes, I will try! I like the President! Go USA!"

The End