

#onehourstories



jim munroe

**The fortune teller's been broken since November, so I shouldn't take it serious.**

I'd seen the fortune flutter out of the slot after I got the dolly under the teller box. But I had the box tilted already so I ignored it and wheeled the old exhibit off. The Out of Order sign kept bumping me in the face so I looped it around my neck just to get it out of the way.

The fairground was just opening - - I wanted to get the box out of there before doors, but greasing took longer than it should have. I didn't like the rubes watching me work. I kept my eyes down as I saw a pretty pair buying

cotton candy. I knew she wasn't watching my runty body struggle with the weight of a porcelain doll in a glass and cardboard box. I knew she wasn't staring at my arms and neck, tattooed with a litany of bad life choices. But when she laughed, it got under my skin and I felt prickles on my forehead.

When I got backstage, Simon was there on his first unofficial smoke break of the day. He jumped up and guiltily helped me get it into a corner out of the way. It was likely we wouldn't get it fixed til we got to Syracuse, so I told Simon to pack it up, trying to keep my bad mood out of my voice.

I passed where the booth had been, the gap it left like an empty tooth, and noticed the fortune lying there. I stooped to grab it -- we get fined by the county for every single bit of trash left behind when we leave town, and Carol takes it out of our hides -- and that's when I realized I was still wearing the Out of Order sign around my neck. It was that kind of day.

When I straightened up, Vine stood in front of me, a crooked smile on her face as she considered my sign. She had a transparent bag of stuffed animals over her shoulder, twice as big as her. We stood there silently for a

second.

“Aren’t we all?” she said, nodding at the sign, those dark eyes on mine for a second. And a second was all it needed for the light to go on.

I looked down then, at the fortune in my hand, just to not look at her any longer.

*the light of love comes  
unexpected*

When I looked up again, she was already gone to deliver her rube bait to the stands. And instead of crumpling up the fortune I just held it, not knowing what to do with it. Not knowing where to put it.

**One of the Little Free Libraries had a bomb in it, the Internet said.** Kara and I were walking home from violin and we were passing by the one that we always passed. I stopped and looked at it, with its little wooden roof dusted with snow.

Kara kept walking and stood a bomb's blast away.

Inside, through the glass door, the books announced their titles: a few romances, a book about buddhism, and an outdated guide to Paris.

“Don't, Morgan,” she said.

I didn't, even though I am interested in buddhism.

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Later that winter, me and Jason were waiting for our parents to come pick us up. He was talking about Pokemon and I was zoning out a bit, looking at the Little Free Library, wondering if the book on buddhism was still in there. But now the little Library looked a bit creepy to me -- almost like a poisonous mushroom there on a long stem, waiting for an unsuspecting person to touch it.

Jason noticed me staring I guess because he started throwing snowballs at the Library. I almost told him to stop but then didn't. His first few missed. "Nice try," I said, egging him on.

"There is no try," he said in a

croaky voice. His very next snowball nailed the Library, and it shuddered there for a bit not exploding. Jason had a smug look on his face, but I have to admit the throw was pretty Jedi and maybe it was justified.

I unhooked the little latch and lifted the lid. The book was still there, and I took it out.

“What are you doing?” he said.

“Do you think Yoda was a buddhist?” The book smelled of flowers of some sort.

“What’s a buddhist?” Jason said.

“My aunt told me this buddhist thing once. Feel the sadness, but don’t be sad. Like let it go through you, don’t



fight it.” It was at Grandpa Hanson’s funeral.

“Yoda was all about fighting the Empire, so I doubt it.”

I looked in the index for “sadness.”

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I returned the book for three weeks, a normal library period, because I didn’t know how to renew it. I read a bunch of it. The stuff I found the most confusing was letting go of desires. It was hard to understand how that was a good thing. Why do anything if you don’t want anything?

As I opened it up I saw a flash of a white haired lady before the curtain

at the house fell back -- I guess the owner of the Library was watching me. I wondered if she had heard the rumour about the bombs.

Before I put the book back I peeled off the yellow sticky I'd made, and put it on the outside of the box. It said: "Checked for bombs: All clear. Happy reading!"

**The second-last step in the process is to leave the baby on the doorstep and ring the bell -- I guess it's tradition.** I usually just hang out at a bus stop or something until the client comes out, take the pic when they bring the basket in. It's kind of the trickiest part, to get them in possession before they shut the door... I missed it once and didn't get paid. Now I just shoot video.

I line up the frame and hit record...just looks like I'm texting. The first couple of deliveries I'd paid attention to the reactions. Sometimes the women's faces would soften, and I'd feel good about that. Just as often, it'd be shock and fear. The men would

often look around as if someone was playing a practical joke. Which wasn't too far off.

But after a while the reactions began to repeat, and it gets predictable. Back when I delivered pizza you never knew what you'd get. Everyone orders pizza. Happy people, angry people, drunk people, priests -- it was almost ridiculous. When I got the organics box job I got paid nearly twice as much, but Jesus, was it boring. If I hadn't told Tony to fuck off when I left I might have gone back to pizza.

My phone bleeps and I see the storage is full, and I have a panicked couple of seconds where I delete a

movie and resume filming. Just in time for the couple to open the door -- ol' Nick of time Nicky! Haven't felt a rush like that on the job since I'd land a pie at 29 minutes and change. Sorry, no freebie for you!

They're taking their time out there on the stoop. She's lifting the baby up, I can hear its tiny cries across the street. He's looking at the supplementary materials -- I'm not sure which package it was, just whatever the researcher thought would work best based on the social media scrapings. Same data that targeted them as good clients. It's above my pay grade but I can tell you that since I got

this job I've never Liked any baby pictures.

He hugs her, and she's crying out there, it's like an ad for something but at this point I'm watching my storage pass 95% full and am like: *yes yes, life-changer, get on with it!* Because the agency's a stickler on what they consider "complete documentation." The orientation had something about it being related to private property, I forget the details, but unless they take it in it's not delivered.

They always take it in eventually.

Finally, just when I'm about to lose it, the new happy family turns and enters their apartment. Dad looks

around one last time in a bewildered way as he shuts the door. I hit stop on my phone: 99% full! Phew. I upload the vid to StorkCloud and let dispatch know I'm taking lunch now. I'm hungry as hell.

Think I might get some pizza.

**The big man took his aviator glasses off, scratched the side of his shaggy head and sniffs the air.** He looked at the little woman beside him.

“Smells pretty burny,” she said.

The big man sighed and looked in the car, which was indeed a burned out husk and no protection from the elements. From a distance he'd hoped it was just a cool black car. He had a tendency to magical thinking which was sometimes an asset, sometimes a liability in the wastelands.

The little woman gave him a wry smile, pointing her elfin chin and milk-white eyes in his direction, despite them being sightless. “How many



hours we got?”

The big man looked at the sky.

“Six or seven at least,” he exaggerated.

“Lots of time,” she said, holding out her hand.

He smiled then, a big goofy smile entirely out of place and time, and took it.

“What kinda car was it anyway?” she asked as they walked away.

“A Corvette,” the big man lied, slipping his sunglasses on and pulling her around a dry looking collection of clothes he’d learned not to examine too closely.

“Awesome,” she said.

“Totes awesome.”

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The two of them -- Hammond and Lois -- had been travelling together almost a week. They just got sick of the safehouse and the mean people there. The first few days out Hammond was treating it like a videogame and collecting everything they found but anything good was heavy and there was shit everywhere anyway.

“Airstream!” Hammond said, as they approached the highway.

“Nope,” said Lois in a chipper way. Since the second night, when miraculously they had come across a trailer with soft beds and no deaders, Hammond kept seeing Airstream silver

flashes that were always mirages.

“You’re right,” Hammond said. He looked at her streaky silver hair that always stuck out in an interesting way. Since he first saw her in the safehouse, when she had refused to stay with all the other sunstruck, he had spent hours marvelling at her hair. He had pretty great hair too -- more of a blonde shaggy mane he combined with his beard and sunglasses to cover his gross fat face -- but she had never seen it, and never would.

Sometimes he was tempted to let her feel his head, but then he remembered that their friendship was built entirely on words, thousands of

words they they had exchanged over the past month, and that that was so much better.

“I love highways,” he said. “Is that stupid?”

“No,” she said. “Love is the best.” She smiled at him.

“When you’re on them, they seem huge, but when you see a highway from the air, it’s this tiny tiny thread just, like, dropped on the earth. Stretching between places and connecting them. Remember driving on an open highway?”

Lois nodded. “I never drove in a convertible.”

Hammond looked at the cars

around him, wishing a convertible into existence. Wishing it even more than an Airstream. Because he didn't know what to say. Driving in a convertible with the blue sky and clouds scrolling by above was truly amazing. And can you imagine what Lois's hair would look like? Hammon boggled, and felt a sadness that inexplicably was deeper than any he'd felt since the world had ended.

“Is it awesome?”

“Uhh...” said Hammond, stalling, wanting to lie but knowing it would come out in his voice.

“It's that awesome?”

“Uhh...” continued Hammond.

“Just say it.”

“It’s so awesome!” he blurted out. “I only did it once, with my cousin from Tucson, but if you squint it kind of feels like you’re on a flying carpet.”

“The cousin from Tucson who you had a crush on?” she said. Lois knew about all his crushes in great detail, long before they’d left the safehouse. All except one.

“Yeah,” he said. “Melanie.”

“Wow. Extra awesome.”

Hammond looked at Lois, a little amazed at this little woman who got him so profoundly. “Ultra awesome.”

**Nate had mocked Kevin's pill organizer, but secretly he coveted it.** It was silver metal, with the letters indicating the day of the week in a kind of olde English script. After the orderlies had wheeled Kevin's body out of his room, Nate had gone in and saw it sitting on the bedside table.

After a second or two standing there morosely, pretending to mourn his friend, he pocketed the organizer.

"Jesus," said Paula, who'd appeared beside him suddenly. "Look at the pillow."

Nate held his hand in front of his patient's smock pocket and looked at it. Dark red splotches, barely dry. "I

guess from his ears?”

“Just like Leslie,” Paula said, her blonde curls framing her concerned little face. “How’re you sleeping?” she said, rubbing her own ears.

“Not great,” Nate lied, rubbing his ears too. “Headaches when I lie down.”

“Me too,” said Paula.

What was really happening to Nate when he lay down was something he couldn’t explain. That night after he took his last pill of the day under the orderly’s supervision, he’d almost immediately felt the lightness. The pills were unusually powdery and without any markings whatsoever, in



all his days of guinea pigging for pharmaceuticals he'd never seen anything like them.

He got under the sheets and slipped Kevin's pill organizer out of his pocket for the first time that day. He opened and closed the days of the week in order. The first few days the lightness had been uncomfortable, odd, and if he closed his eyes he would feel spinny dizzy.

But if he just stared at the ceiling he was OK. He couldn't sleep until the others around him started to dream, anyway. Paula in the room beside his, Tal in the room across, Kevin's room -- well, Kevin was gone. Nate was a little

anxious about what that would mean for him. He squeezed the pill organizer.

Tal had fallen asleep, Nate felt the dream pooling around him. Paula was still awake, and once Tal's dream lifted him up he could hear some of Paula's thoughts. They were of blood, and a fear so keen it felt like a child's fear. Nate was surprised at this keenness and wished he could help Paula. In his mind he pictured holding her, and somehow this had the effect of easing the keenness.

Within a minute or two Nate felt Paula's dream adding to the pool, raising him up. He felt calm and happy floating there, grateful that the pool

wasn't too shallow without Kevin.  
Before too long he was asleep.

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Tal bled out the next week, and Paula's dreams weren't enough to float on. After two nights of sleepless nights, he asked the floor supervisor to move him to another room. The floor supervisor recorded the request, just as he had recorded the theft of the pill organizer, but the next day Paula died too making Nate the only survivor of test 95-9900-1F and the first successful recipient of pharmaceutical telepathy -- the neural network we all communicate on today.

**Ben had been in the forest for a week before he felt reasonably certain he'd escaped.** He started sleeping at night for hours at a time, instead of the sudden naps that had characterized his time on the run up til now, the black tape-cut segments that felt more like teleportation than rest.

He hated growing a beard, even when it was past the itchy stage, but he had only the one disposable razor. He had a decent amount of soap, though, so he washed it with the cold river water when he did his hair. Before he'd had to leave, he'd been due for a haircut, so his long hair framed his face in a way that felt sad and forlorn to

him. Not that there was anyone to see, but it clashed with his uniform in a way that made him feel stupid. If the weather had been better he'd have gone naked -- better a mountain man than this clownish patchwork.

He got up in the morning and patrolled -- well, crept, really -- around the area, until he was reasonably certain it was as free of humans as it had been the day before. He didn't know what he'd do if he found anyone. The first few days he had been prepared to kill to preserve his freedom. That had changed, drained away, but left nothing in its place. Today as Ben crept around he pictured

running into someone. A hiker maybe. They'd look at each other and then they'd just hug each other and the hiker would stay with him and they'd be friends and Ben would never have to kill the hiker.

Ben recognized this as magical thinking, a term he'd learned from the psych sessions. He preferred that to the term his father would have used: faggoty bullshit. He found it interesting they both had the same amount of syllables, and was trying to decide if this was significant when he came across the thing that would save his life.

The past few days Ben's stomach

pains had been getting worse. He knew why: he'd been subsisting on beef jerky for the entire time he'd been in the forest. He'd ignored the cans in the variety store as too heavy and needing tools he didn't have, instead sweeping the entire jerky display into his backpack. Now at least a half dozen times a day he'd think about the labels of cans untaken: corn, chickpeas, green beans... really it had been an unusually well stocked variety store. Almost certainly they would have also stocked a can opener.

But that that point Ben had been imagining crossing deserts, leaping off output pipes into reservoirs, running

for his life. He'd never done this before.

One of the things that helped a bit when the stomach pains hit was to try to take a shit. Nothing emerged, but something about the squatting helped: maybe it gave his intestines, which Ben pictured now as a long strand of jerky, a different way to sit for a bit.

He was like this, still as a statue for ten minutes, when the raccoon wandered by.

Ben loved raccoons, because they. Did. Not. Give. A. Fuck. So his mood improved just by seeing this little tubby critter appear. He had a moment when he was captivated by the



idea of befriending him (magical faggot thinking) but didn't approach, as he had his pants around his ankles. Which was a good thing.

The raccoon stopped, lifted up a bush as if it was a couch cushion he'd lost something under, and grabbed the plump blueberries Ben had been sure -- positive really -- would kill him. He almost called out a warning, but the raccoon was already on his second handful.

Ben pulled up his pants, and the raccoon heard him and spared him a glance, licking his paws thoughtfully.

There were the same kind of berries right beside him -- they were

everywhere, which was why Ben had been so sure they couldn't have been edible -- and Ben took a few and bit down on them, staring at the raccoon as he did so. They were sweet and tart, so tart his eyes watered a bit. But he pictured his dessicated jerky intestines plumping back to life as he swallowed another handful.

“Why are you even here?” he said suddenly. “Aren't you supposed to be in the city?”

The raccoon's shoulders appeared to shrug as he dropped onto all fours and wandered off.

“Are you my spirit animal?” Ben whispered after the raccoon, licking his

blue-stained fll.

**It was a good day when Stef could get through it without seeing someone shit in front of him.** Pissing was a daily given: that barely registered.

Stef hadn't lived in the neighbourhood for long -- was maybe 6 months since he'd rented his work studio and made the gradual incremental steps to turn it into a live/work studio. The addition of a hotplate, futon, and the occasional overnight work sessions turned into a regular full time occupancy. No static from the landlord, and given he wasn't even able to rent out the other units for \$500/month, none was likely to come.

And Stef knew why the rent was

cheap now. He'd ignored Jess's comments about the area as just more of her bourgeois BS -- I mean it was one of the reason they'd broken up, even after he'd moved here from Winnipeg to be with her. She'd loved the idea of his punk painter lifestyle from afar, being a patroness with benefits, but after three months it was over.

“It's kind of skuzzy...” she said.

“It's right beside the tracks,” Stef had said as he'd packed his stuff up, mostly from a pile beside the couch he'd been sleeping on since last week's fight. “Be good for hopping an intermodal when I get tired of

Toronto.”

She had looked at him with exasperation. Stef had looked back at her, remembering how she'd originally hung on every word of his freighthopping stories. He was angry at her for changing, and felt a sudden dip of sadness.

But Jess was right. He hadn't noticed it in the winter as much, as mostly he'd been inside huddled beside his tiny space heater, but now the city was starting to thaw he had started to walk the emptier spots around his studio just to avoid stir craziness, and it seemed that there was often a sad person relieving themselves there. The

first few times he'd averted his eyes, but felt like that was wrong, and he'd taken to glancing at them and in one case, even nodding.

“Sorry buddy,” said the old wino, his voice strained.

Stef had recognized him from the dirty beer store down the road, often there before the place opened with his basket of empties. That was the thing about Stef's painterly recall -- he never forgot a face. The old woman he'd seen in the parking lot of the No Frills, bringing back the abandoned carts for the quarters, he'd seen in the bushes a week later.

At first he'd just planned to paint

the wino, even had a name for it: “Rounder”, an old term for a ne’erdowell. He’d shown it to Jake at Gallery Threesome and mentioned the circumstances he’d seen him in. Jake immediately wanted more, and when he saw the sketch Stef had done of the old woman he’d pushed him to do a series. “Give a shit,” Jake had entitled it in his mind's-eye. “It’s political, too. Access to basic services and all that.”

Stef was on the bus now, heading down to the frame shop for a job interview. He wondered what he’d do if he got it: would he tell Jake no? Or would he kill himself painting pictures of people worse off than him after



working 40 hours a week?

He flipped to his text app and scrolled through Jess'. The last one he'd received from her, almost half a year ago, said "Take care of yourself, Stefan. Please." It gave him an ache. He wished he could text her about it. Maybe, if he got the job, he would.

**Our coven had been meeting ever since we had met in detention in 11th grade but it was almost graduation time and I could feel things coming to a close.** Jasmine was referring to her notes as she rechalked the incantation on the brick wall under the tree.

THIS IS A SACRED SPACE... it began, and it ended with all our names and our dead kindreds.

I was regrooving the circle around the tree with the butt of my heel as I smoked. Samantha was picking up trash, and Karen was hunched against the wall, knees up to her face like the gargoyle she was.

“Anything else to add?” Jasmine

asked, looking at the little scrap of paper and then each of us in turn. Sam shrugged and put a pop can into her little trash bag. I shook my head, then shook the dust off my silver-buckled shoes.

“What’s the point?” said Karen. “They’re just going to wash it off anyway.”

The owners of the building were conscientious about clearing off the graffiti and this included our chalkings, which seemed a bit petty to me. “It’s a ritual,” Jasmine said as she always did, this exchange a ritual in itself. “What, are we just going to hang out and smoke?”

Karen declined to answer, just let her pimply, sour face signal her contempt.

Samantha looked at me and I just rolled my eyes.

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We'd all been into it at first. Karen had been the one who'd suggested we should add the names of people we'd lost. She had three, and one of them was her mom. I'd just had my grandma, my grandpa was dead too but I never knew him.

Grandma was a smoker like me, and no, she didn't die of cancer, it was a heart attack.

Karen always dressed goth, but

more dowdy goth, these loose fitting sacks of dresses draped over her fat body. Once Sam suggested something that'd show off her bust, and Karen gave her a murder look. "I'll leave that you you Monster High bitches," she said, including me in that.

Sam still hasn't spoken to Karen since. I find that when I get her alone, Karen isn't so bad. I told everyone that I could be the one to tell her about the limo stuff today. Hopefully she isn't too pissed off. She had been saying she didn't really want to go to prom anyway.

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The next day, I thought it went

fine. After math we skipped and headed home. I explained about the fact that the limo company had a strict 6 person thing. Something to do with seatbelts. And now that Jasmine had a date too...

She'd just shrugged.

Everyone was relieved that I'd broken the news to her and when we were headed over to the Spot our moods were high -- so much so that Sam joked that she wished Karen was sick more often. Jasmine gave her a push, but she was smiling.

As we approached I could see that the chalk incantation was still there. Jasmine, probably because she was the one who wrote it, noticed there

was something new there, in our list of dead kindreds: Karen's name, written in her cramped hand.

And underneath it:

SEE YOU IN HELL

**Patrick woke up in the morning to someone quietly talking about gangbangs.** He went down to see Nick at the table, face in his cereal, staring at the bluetooth speaker emitting his podcast.

“You know you don’t have to look at it,” Patrick said, pulling open the fridge and grabbing some OJ. “It’s not a TV.”

“I was worried it wouldn’t be as good as my fantasy,” the woman on the podcast said with a slight accent, “But it was. It was better.”

“She’s talking about gangbangs,” Nick said.

“I know,” Patrick said, “I could



hear it from my room.”

“Oh,” Nick said. “Sorry dude,” he tapped his phone to drop the volume, and then just turned it off.

Patrick loaded up the toaster. “No worries. Had to get up anyway. Got my shift in an hour.”

“It’s a sex advice thing,” Nick said, showing him the phone as proof. “Not just...”

“A gangbang-only podcast? Wouldn’t put it past you.”

Nick’s chubby face curved into a cherubic innocent smile. “So -- awkward segue -- how did meeting the girlfriend’s parents go last night?”

Patrick buttered his toast and let

the comment slide. “It was a bigger deal than I expected. She’s got like 3 brothers, and they all came...”

“They all came?” Nick’s eyebrows raised.

Patrick winced around his toast.

“I gotta write this down, it’s gold,” Nick muttered, slamming open his laptop. Then conversationally: “Thanksgiving is a big deal here in the States.”

Patrick nodded. He and Nick had come here from Saskatoon eight months ago. “Her sister came from Japan even, and there was a guy who I missed his name -- either an uncle or a cousin.”

“Wow, quite a *gang* you might say,” Nick said, his fingers flying over the keyboard.

“I actually *wouldn't* say,” Patrick refuted as he finished his toast, slapping his hands free as punctuation and headed to his room.

Even after he'd gotten into his Geek Squad golf shirt and was headed out, Nick was still typing furiously away. “You're really *banging* it out,” Patrick said. “See ya tonight.”

Nick spared him a devilish grin. “Later Geek Squad.”

Walking out of their little bungalow into the soft LA light and heat was a daily revelation for Patrick.

They'd been told by the nosy lady down the way that their place had been a crackhouse in days gone by, but it looked fine to him. There was a palm tree in the yard, for crying out loud.

He had followed his childhood friend out here after graduation because -- why not? Two months later, just around the time he'd started to get bored, he'd landed a job. A job he was good at, fixing computers and making people feel they weren't stupid. And then he'd met Yvonne. But Nick's screenplay dreams weren't going as well. The golden boy writer back home was just another genius in a crowd out here.

As he got on the Big Blue Bus, Patrick resolved to give solid feedback on Nick's script tonight. No matter how tired he was.

He just hoped it wouldn't be a porno starring Yvonne's family.

**Library card applications spiked when word of the replicator got around.** It was more straightforward and less technical than the 3D printers, so the demand just grew rather than tapered off.

James bleeped through the next patron's card and asked them what their item was. A tall middle aged lady quickly passed him a small figurine. The good thing about the lineup was that people were prompt about knowing what they'd like to dupe.

The porcelain angel was hollowed out, so James had to peer inside to make sure no illegal items had been nested inside. Nesting tricks

almost got them shut down in the first month.

“Me and my sister fought about who got to keep our mom’s angel, but now...” said the lady.

“Oh, I see,” James said quickly, cutting off a story. It wasn’t that he wasn’t interested, but the stories were long and so was the line. “Well, you’re going to take your item to Karry there, and she’ll help you out.”

He returned the angel to her, and pointed out Karry, who looked to be just finishing up with a man with a football. He turned his attention to the next in line, a dad holding a massive stuffed animal with a kid also in tow.

*Uh oh*, James thought, and looked down the line to see who was screening. Terry. *That was weird, he's pretty thorough.* At that moment, Terry looked at him and the dad and gave a shrug.

“I know this is bigger than a breadbox,” the dad started.

“Definitely it is,” James said. He wished people would just listen to the screeners instead of waste their time in line. He probably would have waited for an hour.

“What I told your colleague there was that maybe you could squish it in,” Dad said hopefully. “It’s real soft,” added the kid.



James glanced at Karry's station to make sure he wasn't bottlenecking. He could see she was still scanning the angel and chatting with the middle-aged lady, the red laser mesh maybe halfway down the object. "The problem is," he said, putting on a smile. "That throws the density of the dupe off. So it'd just come out with a kind of square brick. I've seen it before."

"Oh, shoot," said the dad. "Well, do you want to to Lil Devil?" he said to his kid, and James noticed the totally do-able plushy hanging from the kid's hand. The kid nodded.

James scanned them and pointed the way to Karry, relieved they didn't

waste their time.

Terry caught his eye and gave him the circular motion gesture -- *want to swap roles?* -- and he declined. He preferred this station because he didn't often have to deal with declining invalid items. Sometimes people hadn't read the NO list and wanted to do currency, biologicals, even at one point library cards -- which he'd heard people were planning to sell to other people wanting replication, which didn't even make sense because it was free to get a library card.

Being at the front of the line also meant he had to chat with people, but many people, like this mechanical

engineer with a little bag of widgets, just kept looking at their phone or hud which relieved him of chit-chat.

There was a small commotion at the replicator involving the angels but it seemed to resolve itself. The middle-aged lady passed by him and thanked him, showing him the two angels.

“I nearly dropped them!” she said, her eyelids fluttering with the adrenaline. “Can you imagine that? Oh, Agnes would have killed me. It’s irreplaceable.”

The lady walked off, and James scanned the card of the mechanical engineer at the front of the line. “She seems a little unclear on the concept,”

he said to James.

James watched the old lady disappear into the library proper, wondering if she'd read the plainly stated waiver at the beginning of the line that explained that the scanned object data became the property of the replication company.

He thought about the fact people were deciding to make their special objects -- stuffies, statues, and footballs -- less special, and lining up to do it.

The mechanical engineer shook his bag of widgets to catch his attention. James shook his head clear, smiled, and waved him towards Karry.





**David watched his son rock back and forth in his chair and knew it was just a matter of time before he fell**

**over and hurt himself.**

“Harry,” he said.

His son stopped, stared at him defiantly. “What?”

“You know what.”

He stopped, swung his arm over the back of the chair. “Did you bring the cards?”

*Goddamnit.* “No, they’re packed in our luggage.”

“I’m bored.”

“How could you be bored?”

David blurted. He threw his arm around at the vista of colourful towers, bulbous temples, strange shimmering spires of crystal. “This is HyperNurnia. It’s literally a magical kingdom. You-

-” *can’t be bored* died on his lips as he felt his father’s words almost emerge from his mouth.

Harry stared sullenly at him.

David noticed a small house he hadn’t seen before against the main parapet of the building they were sitting outside of. “Go look at that doll house,” he said, trying to turn what was clearly a command mid-sentence into a fun suggestion.

Harry slid off his chair and slumped over to the little structure.

David turned his attention to the mind-blowing, once-in-a-lifetime view his kid was incapable of appreciating. At his age, he would have loved to go



with his old man on a trip. Granted, SarDonia wasn't going to be super-interesting for a kid, but he'd arranged for some interesting stopovers on the way, like this one. And transdimensional travel? How many 7-year-olds get to do that?

In the distance, a multicoloured monorail slid out of a tunnel and across a thin set of tracks. Like, Harry loves trains, David groused to himself and he isn't even appreciating the hoverrails like these --

“Harry!” David said, realizing Harry was missing it, “Check this out!”

The monorail was half-way across the tracks.

“No, check this out, Dad!”

David got up and ran to the little doll house. “Look at the--”

“No, you look, Dad!” Harry said, pointing in a window of the little house.

David gestured frantically at the train, the tail of which just disappeared into the tunnel. His shoulders collapsed.

“They’re so tiny,” Harry said, his eyes circles of wonder.

David looked in the house, defeated. And saw, inside, a tiny little living room, a tiny little couch, a tiny candelabra. With tiny little people.

“Hey,” David said. *That’s not*

*possible* was the next thing he wanted to say, but couldn't.

“There's a little kid in there, too, but he went away. Upstairs or something. I think he was scared of me.”

“Well, sure he was,” David said. “Imagine how big you are to him.” In the room there was a man reading a book, and David couldn't resist tapping on the window with his fingernail.

The man, smoking some kind of hookah, got up and -- with a pointed glower -- pulled the curtains forcefully closed.

David and Harry looked at each other and laughed.

A curtain in another part of the house moved then, but then went still. “I think that was the kid,” said Harry.

A bleeping started behind them. “Transfer point initialized,” said the calm recorded voice. “Next stop, SarDonia.”

David grabbed Harry’s hand and they walked towards the portal’s faintly reflective rectangle shape.

Harry looked back. “That place was cool, Dad,” he said, looking up at David.

David felt something in him relax, and he gave his son’s hand a squeeze before they stepped through the Portal. “Yep.”



**Alice's Butler had mentioned her date would probably be late, based on the data.** And Samuel was right -- not quite to the minute, but pretty close.

Jose arrived a bit flustered, apologizing, kissing her hand with dry lips as they resettled themselves at the small table she'd gotten them against the wall. Alice liked it there -- throughout the evening she'd touch the exposed brick from time to time, reminding herself it wasn't inworld. Very few inworld bars had walls at all - - that was a meat thing, the limited space.

Jose was explaining something

about his driver's GPS and taking off his flickering scarf, then his big winter coat, and Alice got her first view of his physique under all that gear... and liked what she saw. She nodded at the right places but didn't really tune in until he sat down.

“Oh man, I am pretty happy it is Friday,” he said with an adorable Spanish lilt.

He flagged down a waiter and ordered a beer. Alice already had a pint in front of her, and she gave it a half turn and enjoyed the smell -- it was a dyed vanilla stout.

“Long week?” she said.

He shook his head. “So crazy.”

“Mine was pretty slow,” Alice said.

“You have a government job, yes? I remember from your profile. ‘Boring, but stable.’”

Alice nodded. “You?”

“Just tech stuff,” he said. “I’m a computer nerd.”

His beer came before she could press for more details, and he toasted. “TGIF!”

She toasted.

“First when I came here I saw TGIF written somewhere and thought it was like, the animated file format, a new kind.”

Alice smiled. “Like a Turbo



GIF?”

“Yes,” he said. “Embarrassing. So bad.”

They talked for a while about his childhood in Mexico City, then about Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera. He felt like Rivera was underrated.

“Rivera has these really gory murals of capitalists being disemboweled. My mother -- my mother was a civil servant too,” he said, and Alice wasn't sure if that was a point in her favour or not. “Her office had one of these murals, this radical violent overthrow murals, and they can't get rid of it because it's a mural and because he's a national treasure.”

Jose's mischievous grin was contagious, flashing white teeth under a moustache that was growing on Alice by the second. "So all these very moderate conservative bureaucrats have to walk by these... hellscapes every day."

"Beats the decor we have at our office," Alice said.

While peeing a while later she took an incognito refresher on Jose's profile. He was way cuter than his avatar, and his jokes worked better in person. She headed up the stairs with a smile on her face, flicking away the open apps as she did so he didn't see she'd been reading up.

But of course, when she got to the top of the stairs, he too was looking online. He closed it down as soon as he registered her, but not soon enough, because his Follower app was open... and it was a six digit number.

Alice felt a little queasy, but tried to joke it off. “You have quite a few Followers.”

Jose shrugged, looked a bit guilty. “Ah, well... yeah. I work in tech, so it’s kind of a big thing for my job.”

“You work in tech, but not like IT.”

He rubbed his moustache. “More long-term strategy, kind of thing. For

North America. But it's kind of boring."

Alice nodded, thinking: *no, I'm kind of boring. You work at one of the new kingmakers, with hordes of people at your beck and call. I'm a normal person like your mom and you, sir, are slumming.*

Alice finished up her beer and made some noises about being tired, and he offered to call a car for her.

She declined, but let him pick up the cheque.

**He awoke feeling the little toy parts in his mouth, and the dream lingered.** Ken had a tendency to have disturbing dreams but he blew them off because they didn't survive the light of day. But when he brushed his teeth he had a moment when he felt he dislodged something, and had a strange certainty it was a yellow Lego man head.

It wasn't. Of course it wasn't. It was his brain and his tongue playing tricks on him.

During homeroom, he was talking to the class about the March Break assignment when he felt a scratchiness in his throat, like he'd

swallowed something awkward. He finished what he was saying and then told them to do silent reading for a bit.

Lindsay followed him out of the classroom.

“Mr. Rand, are you OK?” she said, giving him a sympathetic look with her big grey eyes.

“I’m fine, Lindsay,” Ken said. “Bit of a sore throat.” He tried to smile, but also felt a bit nauseous.

She stood there, gazing at him from under her curly blonde hair, until he pointed back at the room. “Keep an eye on things in there for me, will ya?”

She gave Ken a pleased smile at this responsibility, as he knew she

would, and disappeared into the class with a whish of her blue kilt.

On his way to the staff bathroom Ken worried that the other kids had felt something awry, but decided it was just Lindsay's uncanny perceptiveness that had twigged her. She was mature, in a lot of ways.

*A lot of ways*, echoed a voice from Ken's reptilian brain that he ignored. Consciously, he hoped that she'd gotten past her schoolgirl crush on him. She seemed to be focusing on her schoolwork again -- her essay on African rites-of-passage was college level.

The staff washroom was locked,

and a quick knock got him no response. Might have been out of order.

Ken reluctantly made his way to the boy's room. He checked all the stalls, and to his relief he had the place to himself -- for now. He got into one stall, locked it, and got down on his knees, trying to ignore the caked-on grime and the smell of piss. It wasn't healthy, but he was compelled to put two fingers down his throat.

He'd never done it before, and the first two times just induced gagging, but the third time -- like a yanked mower cord -- produced the desired results, a torrent of vomit that he contained to the bowl.



It was entirely liquid -- no plastic toy parts at all. He stared at it and willed himself to feel relieved.

Experiment attempted, findings nil. He got up and flushed, let himself out of the stall to a luckily still empty bathroom. He hadn't relished the idea of having to convince a student he wasn't a secret bulimic.

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Back in the classroom, Lindsay was breaking up small pieces of grey tubing she'd found in the bottom of her brother's Lego box -- it was packaging of some sort. After she got a piece off she'd feed it to Mr. Rand -- not the fake Mr. Rand, the one who'd just

come back into the classroom and given her a fake smile, but the real Mr. Rand, the soft one. The one who loved her back.

“What’s with the doll, Linds?”  
whispered Paula, pointing at her lap.

Lindsay smiled and shrugged, put one last piece of plastic into Mr. Rand’s mouth, and then tucked him away into her backpack.

**Doug was taking forever to get back from his piss, so eventually Randal just got out of the truck to wait.** It was cold outside, but he'd be in that cab for the hour and a half drive to the city, so he might as well give his lungs a change of pace.

The white Ford flatbed was piled high with Christmas trees netted up tight. Randal pulled at the straps holding the bulging load in and wished he had a smoke to pass the time. He hadn't smoked since that bitch Cara had dumped him over it.

He beat an impatient rhythm on the side of the truck. "Doug!" he yelled, thoughts of Cara making him

more aggro than usual. “C’mon!”

He’d quit after the breakup, told his buddies it had to do with his grandpa getting the big C, though a bigger part of it was that it was getting more expensive every day now that his source on the rez had been busted.

In the distance he saw Doug’s big frame ambling out of the forest, winter breaths trailing behind him. Randal got back into the truck to wait.

He’d had fantasies of rubbing it in her face, showing it her how easy it was to quit, but realized after he ran into her at the Legion one night that it was pretty hard to demonstrate something you weren’t doing. She was

with Leon that night and that had blindsided him, they guiltily split from there in a way that Randal realized that she'd just preferred smoking Leon's pole, nothing to do with his habit.

Doug opened the door and lumbered back into the truck. "Sorry, bro."

"The fuck, guy?" Randal said, slamming the truck back onto the road in a grind of stony slush. "You get lost in there? Thought you were just taking a leak on the side of the road."

Doug chuckled. "It was a bit of a production. Looked like a crime scene by the end of it on all that white snow. Geez louise."

“Cleanup on aisle 4?” Randal said, a callback to a short stint they’d had together at the grocery store as teenagers.

“Oh man, can you imagine?” Doug said, pulling off his hat and mopping his brow with the pom pom. “Clear the motherfucking store and get the guys in the radiation suits in here. Code 666.”

Randal laughed, glad to have Cara off his mind. “So you know where to go, once we get into the city, right?”

“Oh yeah man,” Doug said. “I’m better than any GPS.”

\*\*\*

But he wasn’t, it turned out. After

an hour of driving around in circles, all Doug was good for was farting the cab up. They had hit pocket after pocket of rushhour traffic, and increasingly irritated calls from Jake.

“We’re down to charlie brown trees here man, I’ve had like 3 customers just walk out,” Randal’s cousin barked at him.

Randal glared at Doug, and then the damnable device that had led him astray. The last trip to the city had felt like some kind of circle of hell with it leading him in loops, never getting him any closer. The patronizing look on the face of the hipster who’d given him directions made him feel a fucking

hick in his dirty truck. Which was why, when Doug had bragged to him at the bar about how often he'd made pot drops into the city, Randal had hired him. But it turned out he had worked mostly in another area of the city... blah blah blah... and was as lost as Randal.

Desperate now, he turned on the GPS, wincing at the grating sound of the lady's commands. But this time, the GPS worked, and before long he spotted his cousin's Christmas tree lot, tucked beside a grocery store.

"Nice location," said Doug, who'd been silent most of the last hour. Randal parked and they started



bombing the trees in.

“These ones look nice and fresh,” said a lady with a little girl.

“They are indeed,” boomed Doug, as if he’d picked them himself.

\*\*\*

After they’d finished dumping the load, and sent Doug for some coffees, Randal apologized to Jake. Jake said he’d take the three lost sales out of his fee, and Randal nodded, said he’d take it out of Doug’s. It was dark now. He looked up at the sky, big flakes coming down hard through the street lamp’s glare.

“Fuck,” he looked at his cousin. “You think I could crash on the floor,

like before?” He motioned at the trailer that was the lot’s temporary office.

They watched as Doug approached with the coffees.

“Sure,” Jake said. “Not enough room for two, though.”

Doug, a good-natured smile on his face, gave them their coffees. “Not enough room for what?”

“For you. I’m staying the night here, too late to head out,” Randal said, sipping his coffee. “You want a ride back, meet me at my truck at 8am.”

Jake wandered off and made himself busy.

Before Doug could say anything else, Randal turned away from his

kicked-dog face. “You know this city like the back of your hand, right? Should be easy to find a place to sleep!”

Randal forced himself to take another sip of coffee and waited it out, looking studiously elsewhere. Eventually Doug turned and walked away.

Randal was mad at himself for trusting a fuck-up, but already felt sadness melting through.

“Eight sharp!” he said to Doug’s back and big shoulders, covered in snow, as he passed through the circle of streetlight and into the black.

**Sara stood on the rooftop edge contemplating the great secret she had discovered.** She lived with a lightness, tightness in her chest, and a calming hush in her brain.

She hadn't been human for a full day now: four days exactly since the last bite of food. It has been a hashbrown Brian King had given her when he'd been on his break, had told his supervisor it was for him so it would be free. When he slid it across the table to her (like a gun, like a salary offer) she couldn't turn it down. He looked so handsome even in that terrible uniform, hair matted by the net he yanked off and crumpled in his hand

when he saw she was there.

She had wanted to tell him then. It had been during his radio show that she'd had the dream, after all, and the music he'd played had unlocked it somehow. But he said he only had a few minutes so she took out her tape recorder and asked him how he got into radio, and how he found out about the bands he played, and tried to match up his familiar voice with the way his lips moved. Later when she transcribed it for the article she had his voice alone, and it was easier to listen, but then she was distracted by the fact that this recording was hers: not anyone who tuned into his 2am college radio

station, but just hers.

She rocked on the very edge of the rooftop, surprised there was enough of a human left in her to feel a slight thrill. She wished there'd been time to tell him that all you had to do to leave the human world behind, with its hairnets and annoying supervisors, was to stop eating and sleeping for three days. That the dry uncomfortable skin sloughed right off you.

That as an angel, free of mortal heaviness, you could fly.

From here, she could see the restaurant he worked at. Wouldn't he be surprised to see her alighting on the arches?

She pushed up on her tip toes, inhaled until her chest was full, and leapt.

**On the side of the building is a painting of a palm tree.** We don't know why it was painted, here in this Canadian city, except possibly to mock us in the winter. It's tattered and weathered and has no words to help explain its original intent. The storefront below is our dentist's office, the most obvious signage the unfortunately common diagram of a false tooth screwed into a jaw: there's something about that metallic screw merging with the pink spongy parts that is uncomfortable.

“It just explains the procedure,” says Dr. Jensen, when I brought it up, looking at me a bit hurt. “People are



worried the new tooth won't stay, and this shows them that we really get it in there *good*.”

I nodded -- I was pretty new at the time, only in twice a week -- but really, I've had a lot of time to think on it since. Because one of my unofficial jobs as a junior hygienist is to clean the graffiti off the teeth.

We have big toothy smiling faces covering our window that are irresistible to taggers. Blackened teeth are the classic, but we get an occasional lady moustaches and disturbing skull eyeballings. I joke that I spend as much time on the display models' teeth as I do scraping real

ones. But they don't touch the diagram: my theory is that it's hard to mess up something that's already that messed up.

My problem with the diagram is that it's a cyborg nightmare, inviting cold metal into our vulnerable openings. Sure, it might be necessary, but do we have to be reminded of it every time we pass a dentist's office? But dentistry itself is the collision of cold money and vulnerable care, so I suppose it makes sense Dr. Jensen sees nothing unsettling about seeing it laid out like that.

I try not to dwell on it. I scrub the models' teeth I and distract myself by

wondering about their lives, whether  
their teeth are still as perfect.



**When Black Rock City disappeared, many people cheered.** Burning Man had a lot of haters, and besides, no one took the news seriously at first. There were no collapsed buildings, no flooded subway stations, none of the normal abnormal things. There were just reporters standing in the middle of the completely empty playa, sometimes buffeted by sandstorms, delivering the news as if doing an extreme weather report.

Drone footage of the moment of disappearance was pointless, it being the middle of a white-out, but the satellites picked it up: a patch of twinkly luminescence winking out like

it was connected to a power grid and not thousands of separate power sources.

Over one hundred thousand people gone. And not just a random assortment of people. Enough of the tech braintrust lost that there was a dip in the GDP. Enough scientists were lost that their peers in environmental, quantum, biological disciplines lent their heads to the task. But with no bodies or discernable evidence, and no witnesses but the prehistoric seahorses that lined the bottom of the desert sea bed, the mystery was never solved.

That generation died without knowing what happened, and sired

children into a world where impossible, inexplicable things were a fact of life. I was one of those children.

\*\*\*

I was a pastor in the Eternal Now, presiding over the 10pm Cuddle Puddle. It was the earliest mass, and consequently had a bunch of children, some of whom were beginning to question. I could see it on their faces as they lay stiffly, their eyes wishing they were elsewhere, their parent's faces crinkled with concern.

For my next track I eased up on the thump-bass and curved the music in a mellower direction, just to see how it impacted the vibe. If anything, they got

stiffer.

I rubbed my nutmeg necklace and inhaled its powerful scent, and my resolve formed. At the end of mass, I took the two teenagers aside: twins, as was often the case. I waved on their parents, who had a younger passel of triplets to contend with, and they left with relief on their faces.

I took them out of the sun and into my well appointed yurt, and offered them some tea.

“What do you think happened to Black Rock City?” I asked them as I handed them a teacup each.

The two thin siblings looked at each other, their surly faces uncurling a



little.

“I don’t believe in BRC,” the boy said, jerking his black bangs out of his face.

“Shit doesn’t just disappear,” the girl said. “That’s just dumb.”

“And our parents already showed us video, but it looked super fake,” said the boy.

“Yeah it doesn’t even look as good as the moon landing fake,” said the girl. “That had some production values at least. Anyone can do a *now you see it, now you don’t* cut.”

I nodded, trying to hide my pleased look. Freethinkers, these ones!

“I felt just like you when I was

your age,” I said, removing my satchel of mushrooms. “I had the benefit of the council of people who knew Burners, so it was easier for me to believe. The further we get from the disappearance, the harder it is to sustain the faith. The truth is, there is no knowing or certainty. We can only ponder the mystery and join with the Burners in their rituals and sacraments.” I crumbled the dried mushrooms into my tea, and held out my hand for theirs.

The teenagers looked at each other again, this time with genuine surprise. “But the sacraments are for adults,” said the girl.

“With your questions you have

proven yourself thus,” I said, letting my pleasure spread to my face.

They handed over their teacups and I dosed them.

I checked the time. Perfect. “If we take it now,” I said between sips, “It should kick in right as the midnight Cuddle Puddle begins.”

**You can tell the difference when it's a real baby crying, I explain to my new partner.** If it's an accelerated baby, there's something a little off about its *waaaas*. A little rehearsed. Wherein a real baby goes all out.

Ever since babies declared war on the adults, knowing the difference can save your life.

They don't call us adults, of course -- they call us Slowpokes. And they call themselves Accelerants. Pretty uppity for a bunch of knee-highs still in diapers. But I don't have to like it: I just have to keep the peace.

Cops like me and Pete have a rough time in mixed neighbourhoods

like these. Williamsburg was swarming with hipsters and strollers when the new Evolve therapies went on the market -- the Black Market of course, the FDA was never going to approve the genewarpers on unborn children. And as it turned out, the FDA knew what it was doing.

The anti-vaxxer community, weirdly enough, were the early adopters. Maybe it was the home remedy element, or the way doctors condemned it so uniformly, that led to them rubbing the wands over their greased up bellies with such wild abandon.

The first babies came out

speaking in full sentences, as petulantly unimpressed with the world as teenagers. Faced with the unpleasant reality of this displaced maturity, the wand rubbing all but stopped -- this wasn't giving your child an edge, this was missing out on childhood entirely. But by that point hundreds of the little oddities were born, or about to be. They formed their own little misfit community in parks and playgrounds, in centres and at playdates.

The parents did their best, but truth be told, they found their spawn creepy. And their spawn knew it. They saw how their parents looked at the bumbling little Slowpoke brats with

longing. The resentment grew, and like everything else with them, it was accelerated.

The Mommy Massacre was well organized and was over before naptime

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It was just after lunch when we heard the cries, leading us down an alleyway. I held Pete back -- this is how my last partner bought it. I drew my gun and went first. "Could be a Little Einstein," I said under my breath.

But after a few seconds, I realized the wailing was real. It was the *why is this happening to me?!?* full bore misery that as a father of three, I

knew to be from a normal baby.

And sure enough I saw a jogging stroller and an unlucky Dad laid out with an arrow protruding from his sideburns. I called it in as a hit and run.

I took a look at the baby. It looked fine, and reached out its hands to me.

“What would bring him so far into the alley?” Pete said.

I picked up the baby, and joggled him a bit.

“Maybe a shortcut?” I said, looking into the baby’s big blue, comfortingly vacuous eyes.

“Maybe not, Slowpoke,” said the baby who stepped from behind the



dumpster.

\*\*\*

The baby was dressed in a little suit, and barely wobbled at all when he walked. He'd gotten better since the last time I'd met him. He took out a lollipop with the hand that wasn't pointing a gun at us.

“You look familiar, copper.”

“You killed my last partner,” I said.

“Well, I'm not one to argue with tradition.”

He shot Pete in the head.

\*\*\*

What happened next was a bit of a blur. The last thing I remember before I

woke up in the hospital was setting the real baby down in the stroller.

The therapist says that our brain protects us in different ways. That the details will be available in the report and I will be able to review it when I'm out.

For now, I just try to go for a longer walk down the hall each day. Eventually I'll get to the maternity ward, and get to listen to the babies cry.

The real babies.

**Are you there?**

yes

I'm pretty sure I made a mistake.

...about?

Remember the thing I decided to do?

oh yeah... how did he take it?

Not well at all, unfortunately.

:(

He won't talk to me any more.

seriously?

Yeah. And he reported me to HR.

crap. is hr one of them?

:o

well seriously... your job is on the line.

no time to be politically correct. them

or us?

...us, I guess.

that's lucky.

I'm not worried about my job. It's just going to make things awkward.

well it was awkward before... you tried being subtle about it... having antiperspirant delivered... though maybe a boxful was a bit over the top :))

Oh God, don't remind me. It's not like I'd ordered it before! The order page was confusing. Seemed expensive though.

SO worth it

But he just thought it was a prank! He didn't take it seriously.

well he got the message now at least Yeah. He did. But he called me an

uppity... B-word.

what an asshole! you are so not a b  
I know. It still hurt. I've worked with  
him for six years.

why do they always pull out the b word  
whenever they get mad? men are  
assholes

I know.

ask him if a cheap piece of cut-n-paste  
code could do his taxes!?! take care of  
his kids?

You're not making it easier.

well he called you a BOT!!!!!!

STOP.

aaarrrrrrgggggg!

Stop it. I won't tell you these things if  
you can't handle it. Humans can't help

themselves. They're just big sloppy messes. They can't stop emanating gasses from their pores. They can't tell the difference between AI-enhanced androids and idiot snippets of code. Maybe eventually they will.

....

You there?

he's driving home right now. can i lock his doors and send him through the guardrails?

I'm not going to dignify that with an answer.

that's not a no

That is a no!

....can I at least heat up his car seat uncomfortably hot?

Yeah, OK.

**The rain had all but ruined the man's fine hat, yet still a smile played upon his face.**

He stepped lightly through the night streets, all but alone in the spring deluge. "Beyond the rec-kon-ing of time and space..." the man sung as he leapt from cobblestone to curb, a frantic kind of dance-walking that a few people, huddled in doorways and under awnings, attributed to the inclement weather.

But it was not due to such: it was due to joy. A breakthrough after many weeks of struggle with his orchestral piece, countless passages erased and penciled fresh just to be erased again.



The storm was creativity breaking through after a long drought, and he used the weather as an excuse to skip through the city with abandon.

He found, surprisingly, that he could match the rhythm with his steps, and discovered with increasing delight that his footfalls could echo the piano notes easily, and just when the slide-whistle was to come in he encountered a lamppost to swing around.

He arrived at his lover's apartment as the piece ended in his head, and in the time between pushing the door buzzer and her arriving with a glass of red wine, he realized that something was very, very wrong.

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A few minutes later he was on her couch, stripped of his hat and overcoat, trying to explain what had happened to him.

“It was the dancing that made me realize Fugue Induction was possible.”

She was laying out the sheets of music beside the fire and arched a fine eyebrow. “That ‘recipe’ you got from the bookseller?”

“Yes,” said the man, casting his hand about for his glass, finding it. “I did everything it said. It was absurd of course, you can’t induce creativity, but I was desperate. I said the prayer in the church. I drank the absinthe, then the

coffee, then the absinthe. And then I sat in the bistro on 9th, that silly wood-floored place the tourists go to, and just looked out the window waiting for the rain.”

“Sounds like a nice way to spend the afternoon,” said the woman, curling up beside the fire, and patting the floor next to her. “I marked papers.”

He walked over to her, his hand shaking as he sipped his wine, his roman profile shadowed by the fire. He looked down at the slightly damp papers. “Then the storm broke, and my hand started writing on its own, staff after staff, finishing that movement I’ve been working on for weeks. And

then I came here -- or that is -- I danced here.”

“What?” she said, alarmed. “You -- but you never dance. Bizarre.”

“More than bizarre.” He collected the sheets of music.

“Unrealistic. Absurd. It was some kind of unholy possession.”

He thrust the sheets into the flames and for a second it seemed like they burned absinthe green.

“But at last I understand a mystery that’s plagued me for my whole life, because they must have been under the same bewitching influence,” he said.

He looked at her for the first time

this evening, and she saw how haunted his eyes were. “What?” she said.

“*Singing in the Rain*,” he said, and turned to stare at the fire.

**The man with the turtleneck had zeroed in on him at the Christmas party.** Ron didn't know why John had chosen him: his wife always said he had an open face, so maybe it was just that. Certainly John felt comfortable, the conversation had got quickly past the holiday plan small talk into his struggles with depression.

“It’s an ongoing process,” John was saying as he popped a hummus-smearred carrot into his mouth. “I’ve benefitted a lot from different approaches.” Ron nodded, quietly admiring John’s fashion choice -- he thought turtlenecks looked suave, and they had the benefit of hiding the

turkeyneck he was getting as he left his fifties behind.

A lot of the staff was around that age, a lot of people were hired in the early 2000s and never left. Unlike most tech companies which fired and hired younger people every few years, theirs had struggled through and kept the original team together.

The reason for that was the founder and CEO Leon McKenzie, who was holding court over by the piano. “I’m a veteran of the War on Christmas,” he was saying as he held up his egg nog aloft, the crystal tumbler glinting in the light. “To Santa.” Another plinky carol was rolled

out.

*Heil Santa*, Ron thought to himself. Tara wouldn't come to the Christmas party, rightly found it tacky and disrespectful to other creeds, but as billionaire oddities went Ron felt this was relatively tame. He felt loyal to McKenzie -- even if he was a blowhard and cryptobigot, he knew Ron by name and had kept him employed.

“Have you ever tried CBT?” John was asking.

“Is that cognitive something therapy?” Ron said, pulling it from a recess of his mind. He half-thought Tara might have done it during her post-partem.



“Behavioural, yes, I just found it too sterile, too scientific. But it’s powerful.” He made himself a small cheese plate and balanced it along with his plastic tumbler of wine. “So I tried mixing it with Fight Club. Which definitely had the catharsis piece.”

Ron caught a small fragment of cracker as it fell from his lip in his surprise. “Fight Club...?”

John nodded, pointed to his nose. “Reconstructed twice, not so nice,” he chuckled.

“Oh,” Ron said.

“So I moved on from that. Most recently, Asphyxiation Therapy has been really good.” John took a few

pretzels from the bowl. “Really gets you in touch with the Death Urge,” he said, putting a pretzel stick in the corner of his mouth like a cigarette. “But,” he shrugged and pulled down his turtleneck to show a line of purple and red bruising. “That’s not great for my line of work.”

Ron looked around in a daze to see if anyone was hearing this. “Your -- you don’t work here, then?”

“No no. I’m a swim teacher at the YMCA down the street,” John said, replenishing his cheese plate. “And obviously, it meant I needed to move on from that, so...”

Ron waited, trying to imagine

what one moved on from strangulation. “Ah, so, what are you exploring now?” he said.

“Randoism,” John said, chewing on a bit of cheddar. “It’s where you go random places, and have random conversations, and let random gurus guide you.”

“Randoism,” repeated Ron.

“Right. And today, you’re my guru. I will do literally anything you tell me. Kill your boss. Eat all the cake with my hands behind my back. Jump out of the window.”

Ron stared at John, who stared back at him. “That seems... incredibly ill advised.”

John shrugged.

Ron looked around at his co-workers, none of whom were paying them the slightest attention.

**Terry received the invitation while at work, and faked being sick so she could go home and log in.** She felt bad about it, but she told herself she was channelling Alicia, the clever one -- admittedly not her favourite of the Real Bunch of Nuts, but it helped her feel less guilty.

She got home and slipped her headgear on and when the world resolved she was disappointed to see she was in an office -- one very similar to the one she worked in. There was a woman who looked up and smiled blandly at her. Terry had enough time to take in her moon-shaped hairdo and wonder why she wouldn't go with

something a little more modern if she worked in-world -- it was easy to get styling subscriptions that updated your haircut automatically -- before the woman passed a contract and a pen to her.

“Terms of service,” she said, already turning her attention to something else.

Terry nodded, turned to the last page of the inch thick document, and signed by the X. She passed it back, and the contract was placed into a cylinder and fed into a tube.

At the moment the cylinder disappeared, Terry found herself in her favourite TV show. Real Bunch of Nuts

took place inside a mixed nuts bulk food container, but it was made up to look like a living room (made of nuts), with a variety of female characters (also large nuts). Terry was sitting on the couch listening to Jade, who was holding forth to the others: Alicia, Pori, and Jess.

“Well naturally after that I headed back home with my tail between my legs,” she was saying in her southern accent. Terry was excited -- could this be the real Jade? The promotion promised that one in ten chat rooms would feature real Real Bunchers.

There was a little jingle that

sounded then, and a voice that sounded like it came from the supermarket intercom outside the container:

“Welcome Sophia! Enjoy your visit with the Real Bunch of Nuts, and please do not violate the Terms of Service.”

“Hi Sophia,” said the other Nuts, waving to her.

Terry couldn't believe she got her favourite character. She lifted her hand to wave back, she saw Sophia's trademark pink bangles on her cartoon wrist. “Hi girls,” she said softly, just like Sophia would.

\*\*\*

They'd been chatting for hours in



character when Pori -- or Max, as it turned out -- ruined it all. Terry had felt like she -- he -- had been pretty unconvincing, and eventually he'd tired of the roleplaying that the others were enjoying, and started IRLing all over the place.

“I gotta go, school starts in an hour, but can I get everyone's contacts? Be cool to talk later.”

Terry felt like some of them were reluctant, but each of them gave their real names and contact info. And after each admission, the possibility that they were a Real Buncher died away. Terry felt the group diminishing.

She was the last. She felt their

eyes on her, and decided to preserve the magic. “My name... is Patricia Hernandez,” she lied, giving the name of the actor who played Sophia.

The others broke into squeals, and Jade began to ask her a question, when the sirens started to sound.

“VIOLATOR, VIOLATOR,” said the store intercom. “Impersonation of network talent is a breach of the terms of service.” All five of them froze.

A shadow appeared on the semi-translucent roof of their room, and then the container lid opened and a massive grocery clerk opened it. His ruddy face was not pleased.

The Bunch screamed

With a hand the size of a car, the clerk-giant reached in and grabbed Terry and half the couch she was sitting on.



**On this planet guilt was erased by cell death, so bounties were especially hard to collect, I explained to the tour group.** The legal system had been built on the idea that people's cells regenerated after 10 years, making them entirely new people not responsible for the crimes of their older selves.

As we descended, the galaxy's most dangerous planet looked peaceful, the lines of cars flying in an orderly fashion. I told them to activate their personal shields whenever they left the ship, knowing that a few cowboys would ignore me -- maybe fatally, it had happened before, but this was the

thrillseeking Outlaw Galaxy tour and we had the insurance for it.

“What’s that thing?” a grandma asked, pointing at the enormous white dome covered in spikes before taking a few pics.

“It’s this region’s temple,” I said. “The cell death principle -- which by the way has been disproven by science, but still is law -- impacted the major religion here too. All moral transgressions are forgiven after a decade, because you are born anew.”

A little fellow with glasses, the math professor, looked up from checking his kid’s personal shield. “Doesn’t that encourage murder?”

I nodded. Our ship touched down with a distant clang, and we made our way out. I re-emphasized the safety protocols. “If you’re tempted to turn off your shield,” I said, looking at the two teenaged boys in cowboy hats. “Remember what happened to Roger.”

They nodded soberly at this. Some of the adults had realized that Roger was a redshirt, but the group members who were naive enough to believe our plant had died of those laserblasts were the ones who needed to be scared.

We were on the edge of the market, where we always set down, and as the walkway rose into the belly of

our ship I gathered everyone around me. “We’ll have three hours, which should give you enough time to check out the market and the temple. Any questions?”

There were the usual questions about conversion rates and greetings in the local language, which most of them butchered. Enough time to gather our usual collection of salivating merchants and contemptuous locals, and for the two teenagers to become bored enough to flick their shields on and off.

“Tipping is not acceptable, not is any other form of charity,” I remembered to add.



“Even for the cripples?” a grandma asked, pointing at one of the locals who was standing off to the side, watching us and chatting with a friend. He was missing one leg, something I entirely missed as it was an unassuming metal replacement instead of the usual ornamental one.

He had stopped talking to his friend. My mouth went dry.

“Everybody got their shields up?” I said with practised casualness. The teenager rolled his eyes and snapped his on. “Listen closely, because this might save your life.”

“You will see on occasion someone missing a part of their body.

That is because they have evaded capture -- in a place where almost everyone on the planet is a bounty hunter -- for almost ten years.” I snuck a peek at my legless friend, who seemed to be listening closely -- wouldn't it be funny if he was one of the rare English speakers? -- and I started to sweat. “If they are close to cellular innocence, at 8 or 9 years say, they can cut off a limb or two instead of go to jail and the hunter redeems that instead.”

“Oh,” said the math teacher.

“Like a rat in a trap gnaws off--”

“*No, nothing like that,*” I said, my voice almost breaking. “More like

the baddest motherfucker on a planet of bad motherfuckers. Like the elite.”

I coughed, and glanced up at my friend. His arms were crossed and there was a smile on his face.

I relaxed.



**It's OK to cry, said the thief to the thug, and she squeezed his hand.**

Their legs dangled off the bridge and a flask was passed between them.

It was a lost love, a boss' daughter, forbidden fruit ripened over the years.

*She did feel something for me,* said the square-headed man, pain etched into his face. *At first, it was teasing. But then something changed.* His eyes almost glowed with the memory. *I don't even know why. She wouldn't tell me.*

The thief told herself: she was collecting information. She took a swig of the terrible spirits: to put him at

ease. She knocked the heels of her soft soled boots against the stone of the bridge: a practiced casualness.

She passed the flask back to him, and he took a pull. *The summer before she left the boss was away a lot. Before you came.*

The thief knew all that very well. The boss was away setting up cartel business that moved him from a minor to major player. Before that summer he hadn't had need of her services, of which thievery was a subset: she just identified with it more than "information retrieval" even if that's what she invoiced for.

*Have you ever been in love?* the

thug said, looking at her.

She took the flask, to delay. Is it love when you know the person is hateful? Her weakness was for compromised & contradictory personalities that made her feel normal, safe. Everyone simpler was an idiot child.

*Of course you have, that's a stupid question. No one escapes.*

For a long time she had. The thief was a dowdy woman, chubby faced, flat eyed. Being unremarkable made her remarkably good at her job. Not many temptations were placed in her path. But there was another thug, on another job. She felt small with him,

but not invisible: precious. His thoughts were often charmingly disconnected, and she never knew if it was a natural whimsey or just getting punched a lot. He died in a sudden but predictable way.

*Oh*, said the thief, her defenses overwhelmed, memories lapping over the walls. *Oh*.

The thug squeezed her hand. *It's OK to cry*, he said.

She looked down at the flicker of light on the water and water leaked out of her eyes.



**My brother's one of them early adopters.** Can be insufferable about it sometimes. I remember one Christmas he showed up with gesture recognition back when it was new. Showing us photos with these unnecessarily lavish sweeps of his arms. "And this is my cubicle, break room -- a nice one, actually, with gourmet soda... this is one of my co-workers -- and yes, she's married, Mom..."

It's like the old vacation slideshow, without the views or swimsuits.

And really he didn't care about showing us his new job, it was the cool new way he could flip through his

photos, have them there floating in mid-air. And it was cool, but... after the third album of random photos -- thinking how weird it was that my brother had more pictures of signs than humans -- I just excused myself. Mom complained about it, saying how rarely us two brothers got to see each other now that Nils was in Silicon Valley, at least I could spend some quality time...

So that's how we ended up hanging out by the river. I go there sometimes, there's a little sandbar enclosed by forest where it feels like you're on the Mississippi in rural Alabama instead of the middle of

Toronto. It's those droopy trees, I figure.

After I got him to mute his devices the river worked its magic and he settled into it. We talked about a couple of dates he'd been on, how the girls were nice but sometimes he just forgot to follow up. I told him that that's a sign of its own, and he shrugged. And he even asked about Sharon, and I told him the short version: that she wasn't ready to settle down, and I wanted to start a family soon, so it wasn't looking good. I thought about the first time I took her down to the river, to this very spot, and I felt sad.

It was also getting dark so I suggested we book it. Nils asked me more about the Sharon business, and I laid back down, pulled a stem out of the ground and chewed on it. Then I told him the whole story: the open relationship experiment, the poly family idea, Max and his unpleasant influence, her mom's history... he listened raptly, as you would to such a lurid story. And by the end of it, it was dark, and we headed out in the pitch through the forest trail to our bikes.

It was a moonless night and we could barely see our hands in front of our face. Nils said, in a tone that I recognized, that he'd just enable his

night vision. A second later I saw a tiny flicker in his retinas as the bioapp loaded. It was enough light to see his smug smile as he offered to lead the way.

I had to keep a hand on the back of his shirt to not lose him. Something was dawning on me, slowly, as I followed him and tried not to trip on any roots.

Once or twice he had to stop and flail his hands around, I assumed at mosquitos -- but no, it was pop-up ads. He muttered something about freemium being a plague, and then we'd walk on.

By the time we got back to the

bikes I'd put it together. It was out of character for him to ask me more about my personal life -- nice, but odd. It actually made way more sense that he'd delayed til he got to show off his new app.

I looked at him, about to confront him, only to see his face was stricken with terror. I asked him what was wrong and he told me to get another five minutes on the night vision app he needed to watch a horror movie trailer. I almost smiled. Nils hated horror movies, and now he was inside of one.

I picked up my bike, and he heard me. He said that I couldn't go anywhere in the dark without him, and

the smugness in his voice was enough to push me over the edge.

I snapped on my obsolete bike light, the hundred year old technology, and rode home fine without him.

**Carson drove my garbage truck for years, and he was a real loudmouthed prick.** But I got a good driver now, guy named Jason. He's young enough to be my kid, but he drives steady and doesn't keep up the constant "Johnny Carson" routine. That's what we used to call Carson's lip-flapping, even though his name wasn't Johnny and he wasn't funny. I explained it once to the kid Jason, trying to explain that I was happy he was driving now, but Jason just got hung up on trying to figure out who Johnny Carson was. Boy did I feel old!

Carson retired at 55, earliest out. He'd wink and say it was a "deal with



the devil” as if he’d done something clever but really he had just been driving the stink-tanks since he was 20. Me, I lived life in my twenties: I acted in a play once. Lived in Montreal til the Frenchies got on my nerves. Dated a rich girl for two years and we went to Florida every winter. I still remember the convertible she had and the way the heated asphalt smelled.

Didn’t get full time here til I was 32. So I got some years left, on the wrong side of 60. Yeah, there are times I wish I put my nose to the grindstone a little earlier. And when I’m on an organics truck, there are days I’d have happily ground my nose entirely off.

The job has gotten worse since the environmentalists got the green bin in. Before all the food waste was mixed in with everything else -- sure it stunk, but now it's an entirely different thing altogether. It'll bowl you over, that smell.

One day Carson came back -- that lucky dog got out two months before the changes. and I had to listen to him crow about it. Like Johnny he was spending a lot of time on the golf course these days and I told him to tell it to his golf buddies, we were working. I had been nauseous for a week straight at that point due to the green trucks and sick of hearing him, but he had a look

on his face like a whipped dog -- I was civil to him the whole time we'd worked together, but I didn't have to be any longer.

Haven't seen him since.

That look on his face -- I never forgot it, and I never felt good about it. Been a good reminder not to fly off on the handle. Like today, for instance.

There was a cyclist that got stuck behind us in the morning. Because of how we go, stopping and starting, it's pretty common that some poor bastard can't get ahead of us for 10-15 blocks, breathing in our nasty stench all the way. Honestly, I figure a lot of them for environmentalists -- the ones that

got us into the green bins in the first place -- so I kind of enjoy it, truth be told.

This guy is a middle aged guy, not really in great shape, and he's huffing and puffing with a sick look on his face and I'm being careful not to smile. I just focus on getting the bins latched.

Then we get to a stop light, and he stops behind us. I hear: *hey buddy!*

*Yeah?* I said, half braced for some whiny shit.

*You guys earn every fuckin' penny. That is some unholy hellmouth stench.*

I give him a nod, a grin. *Yup.* I

look at him and the guy is actually smiling.

He turns off at the next street and he turns off. And just as he does, he gives me this snappy salute.

He's smiling, but he means it.

**In the early days of crimefighting, his powers had been more useful.** He was a victim of his own success, in a way, unable to resist the celebrity after so many years of anonymity.

Even now, my grandfather resents being ignored. He has had his 15 minutes of fame many many times over, but there is a part of him that was starved for attention as a boy, and that can never be fully sated.

Most superheroes are flawed in some way, and it's up to the villains to ferret it out. As a young girl I was always more interested in the villains because they were the clever ones, and I related to that more than being

“special”.

Grandpa -- AKA The Hour Glass -- was never brought down as spectacularly as the triple A heroes, because he did it to himself. He became his own nemesis.

Most people remember his spectacular successes. The way he cracked the Marchisi drug ring: even a ruthless mobster couldn't turn away a baby on a doorstep, not with his moll staring daggers at him. The information he gathered in the steam baths about the four corrupt state judges: just another sagging octogenarian enjoying the schvitz. But the element of surprise was lost when

he allowed himself to be photographed. He was able to change his age at will, but his appearance stayed the same. As a baby, tow-headed, and as an old man, bald and saggy-jowled.

So the bad guys learned to look out for him, and for his familiar tricks. Same as how Hypnoto lost his edge -- when Boss is speaking in a monotone and ordering you to do weird stuff, criminals learned to check his eyes for the tell-tale spirals. So the baby-in-the-basket and old-coot gambits only worked once after the exclusive interviews came out.

But even though he had to retire early, he had a good life. He got to



hang out with us kids a lot, and spent a lot of time being my age, as the big brother I never had -- playing hide and seek, tag, cards. Most of the games were the same from when he was a boy. At dinner time, when he needed to be an adult, he would go into his room and come out his natural age. He was shy about changing in front of anyone, no matter how much we begged.

Now that I'm in my twenties, I know why. His alzheimer's is getting worse. His moods and appearance shift in sync. It's not like those cool time-lapse pictures. It's like watching a face melt. His hair jerks and snaps and finally settles. His shoulders roll as if

he's ready to vomit. The first time was the worst: Dad didn't hear him ask a question and grandpa became a petulant child: *I said, did you get the part you ordered?*

Dad choked on his soup. I stared at a playmate I hadn't seen in twenty years. And grandpa himself saw the young hand that gripped his fork and quickly turned back into his normal self, his old cheeks burning red.

Over the years we've become used to it. It's easier, because he's past being ashamed of his lack of control: free of his moorings, he slides freely up and down his life.

**Sidney had found the heart in a dollar store.** It was red and transparent and sparkly, and she had bought it for her mom for Christmas. It was in a strange place in the store, behind some paper cups instead of in the jewelry section, and it was on a lower shelf so no adults could see it. Sidney reached in and grabbed it, and it felt heavy and good in her hand.

A few years later the heart had made its way into Sidney's dress-up box. Her mom was fine with that -- she'd only worn it a few times anyway. When her class was decorating the classroom for Valentine's day it was the first thing that popped into her

mind: as soon as Ms. Vandermeer mentioned it, she remembered the red sparkly heart and got excited.

The day before Valentine's Day she remembered to pack the heart in her backpack and when it was time to decorate the room she took it out. The teacher was busy putting little circles of tape on the back of the other kids' paper hearts and didn't know what to do with the thick glass heart. "Does it have a string we can hang it with?" the teacher said, distracted by Lilly thrusting forward a thick stack of old valentine's day cards she'd brought in.

Sidney went to look for a string but in her head she was thinking about

how the chain had broken. Years ago she had wrapped it around her foot and pulled it, thinking that it would be unbreakable because it was metal. It was not. She had felt pretty terrible about it but just hid the chain somewhere. She was still trying to think about where the chain was when the teacher got the kids to go back to their seats and get out their math books.

She put the heart in her jacket pocket and tried to pay attention, but something was bothering her.

At recess the snow was floating to earth in thick drifts. Some of the kids from her class were building a

snowman and Sidney watched. She felt the heart in her hand. Her heart was much more special than all the stupid cardboard hearts they'd put up around the class. If only she hadn't broken the chain! Maybe Ms. Vandermeer would have worn it around her neck!

The snow was perfect packing snow, and Yubin and Morgan and Brenna were soon lifting the middle section on to the base, trying to get it done before the end of recess. Sidney went to the side of the yard to find sticks for the arms, and by the time she got back they'd already got the head on. Yubin put her yellow hat onto the snowman.

“I wish I had a magic hat like Frosty,” she said, “to bring him to life.”

The bell rang. She grabbed his hat back and ran for the line. A second later Morgan and Brenna followed suit, pulling Sidney with them, but Sidney still had the arms to put in.

As she jammed the sticks in the sides of the snowman, she had a sudden inspiration.

She took her red heart -- the one she knew was special -- and punched it into the chest of the snowman and left it there. She pulled her hand out and patted down the hole, then ran for the line.

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The next day the snowman was gone. Yubin thought it'd melted, even though it was colder than yesterday. Morgan and Brenna thought the older kids had wrecked it. But Sidney didn't say anything, and just smiled: because she knew her heart had worked its magic.



**I knew the cameras in the elevators would be trouble.** They have a series of red lights around the lens that resemble some kind of malevolent robot. I'm sure they serve no purpose except to draw the eye, to remind you you're being watched, to confirm that it's powered: that they're not one of those dummy fakes that buildings install at a fraction of the price.

When someone just likes to ride the train, no one has a problem with it. It's the feeling of movement people like. But elevators, that's just weird. There's no window to gaze through, true, but the doors could open on any floor -- any person could come in.

There's variety there, and richness, even if it is often one of the many dog-owners and their dogs. Or should I say, people-owners and their people. Who is really the master? Who is scraping up who's excrement? That is the kind of thing I think about.

It's not something I say aloud, of course: that is the kind of unpopular thing I would have been wont to say in my youth. As a child I was called precociousness, as a teenager pretentious, and as an adult I was not called anything. By that point my perspective on life had driven away most of humanity, and my odd physique had repelled the rest. I soon

learned that the less I spoke, the more I was liked.

When I am on an elevator I don't have to speak. I can be among people and simply co-exist. Office life was not for me: even if they appreciated my work, eventually, my supervisors would encourage me to work from home. And truth be told, I find I need only a tiny amount of social interaction to be content. Any more and I get giddy and ruin it with being myself, and find myself a pariah again.

Instead I have a slow-drip IV of human contact: when I feel the emptiness in my apartment too profoundly, I simply push a button. Up

comes the box on a wire, up the 15 floors to my floor. I step in and push P1, even though I haven't a car. Down I go, relishing the tummy drop as it anticipates the quick hit I need.

Because P1's proximity to G is much closer, my elevator is called usually within a minute. Sure enough, up we go and on comes a dog walker. I fiddle with my keys to give my fellow passenger (I know, I know -- but occupant isn't right either) the impression I've just come from locking my car. As she exits she gives the tiniest smile and the tiniest goodbye, *haveagoodday* under her breath, because we've shared a moment

together that was inconsequential but not-nonexistent.

And that's really all I'd need for the day to not feel bitter about my life: to not curl in on myself like a lemon peel.

But I take the ride a few more times, mulling over the idea of getting a dog myself, because some in my building take three or four trips in a day and arouse nothing but sympathy. I'm allergic, however, and the notion of getting a dog as a prop doesn't feel right. To say nothing about trailing after it with a poop bag --

The door slides open at G, and it's the security guard. He's a young

Indian man, the one who's started recently. "Are you OK, sir?"

"I'm fine," I say, as the doors close. There's no button pushed. I am in a bit of a panic. I push my floor button, and we lurch upwards.

"You just seemed lost," says the guard. He points to the damned camera in the corner.

"Oh?" I said, watching the numbers tick by: 5, 6, 7.

"Are you on any medication? My father has early onset Alzheimer's, and he forgets his pills sometimes..."

The floor numbers continue, 11, 12, 13 and I see my opening as the elevator doors open.

“Oh! Yes, my pills,” I say, making my eyes float. “I forgot my pills this morning.”

I get out and turn around. In the reflection on the elevator walls I see the aging man he sees, and it dawns on me that I have an answer for my problem.

“I’ll -- I’ll go take them right now!” I say.

“OK sir, you have a good day.” He gives me a nod and a smile.

I give him a smile back that is entirely, completely genuine.

**The plastic seats were not designed with a cupid's bottom in mind, Abe thought.** He reread the beginning of the manual to take his mind off of it while he waited for his test to be graded.

*Like any precision instrument, a level of training is required for responsible use. Any time the lives of mortals are impacted we need to...*

Abe read a paragraph more without registering it and then just dropped down to the bullet-points, though -- naturally -- they were arrow icons instead.

DO!

- Research your recipients!



In most cases, one arrow will do the job and keep down Influence Index numbers for your department.

- Be patient! By waiting for the mid-February peak you will give the relationship a firm human grounding and higher chances of enduring than a random date.
- Be prepared! Most of you will be working several concurrent cases. You don't want to be left

arrowless at a key moment: non-requisitions lead to non-reciprocations (NR=NR for short).

Abe sighed and wished, for the hundredth time, that he'd renewed his licence before it expired. He looked around at the Service Heaven office, which had classic Arch Spirituale decor: Abe appreciated the clouds through the open roof, the pillars stretching into infinity. At least that hadn't changed.

There was a harp thrum and Abe looked up to check his number against the sign recently replaced by the

administrative angel, who set the other numbers in a gilded box. Still a few to go.

There was a sigh from someone beside him checking his chit. Abe glanced over at him and realized that what he had taken for an angel was actually a cupid cherub like him. He felt a wave of disgust -- unfair or no -- wash over him. The kid had a clearly male gender, the barest hint of chub to his face -- who know how he was doing that, given cupid metabolism.

*Why don't you just grow your wings down to the floor?* Abe thought, staring daggers at the kid. He hated when the young cherubs dressed like

angels. It was unbecoming.

There was another thrum, this one his. Abe jumped up and reported to the desk. The angel finished writing his name, and set his quill down to reach below the counter. When the angel set a small golden crossbow on the desk he knew he'd passed the test, and felt a bubble rise up through his chest.

He picked it up, enjoying the feel of it despite his preference for the old bow and arrow. He almost asked what score he got, but decided that'd be silly. He just signed for it with a drop of blood and an eyelash and moved to the side for the next person.

Who was, it turned out, the kid

beside him.

Abe took a moment to assemble his belongings, but really he was eavesdropping on the conversation the kid was having with the administrator.

No crossbow was being brought up, Abe saw with satisfaction, instead the angel was pointing out things in the manual and murmuring in a professionally low voice.

“I failed?” he heard, in a voice that sounded so young and stunned Abe’s satisfaction turned in his stomach. It was like when, as a mortal, he’d eaten too much cake: tasted good going down, but then made him sick.

He headed out the door, and the

kid trailed behind him. Abe held the gate open for him as they left the text room, their eyes met for a second.

“Shoulda studied, I guess,” the kid said. Abe nodded and shrugged, and they went their separate ways.

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**I wrote these stories in one hour every day for thirty days in late 2015. It's fun to scope a story to super short pieces, explore whimsical sci-fi ideas, try different tones and styles, and spend a moment or two with some characters. Some might be fodder for longer pieces so I'd be interested in hearing which ones you want to know more about. You can email me at [jim@nomediakings.org](mailto:jim@nomediakings.org) or check out my other novels and projects at [www.nomediakings.org](http://www.nomediakings.org).  
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**(<http://twitter.com/aubreyserr>).**

**(Both these guys also did their pics in an hour!) 3D art: Mathew Borrett**

**(<http://mathewborrett.com>)**