



bad  
futurist

ISSUE 01



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# WE ARE ALL MADE OF STARS

## **PART I**

"I don't believe in the supernatural."

That's something Tony said to me ten minutes into our first date. Normally such a statement wouldn't vex me much. I respect healthy skepticism and Tony was a grad student studying theoretical physics. It would be odd to expect such a man to be a believer.

What pissed me off to no end, though, was that he said it in response to my suspicion that something "supernatural" was lurking around my apartment. You know, a poltergeist or what have you.

To brush off the weird things I'd experienced so blithely seemed smug.

He must have been able to read my displeasure at his reply. His hand made its way to mine from across the dinner table (also presumptuous).

"No, no let me explain," he said gently. His earnest look along with the warmth of his hand on mine soothed the indignation that had been ready to explode.

"What I mean is: I don't believe in the term supernatural.

In literature, sure. But in the real world? In life as we know it? It's not a very useful word. At least, not in my opinion."

I raised my eyebrows.

"Really not helping your case there, Spock."

He smiled at that. His smiles were crooked and perfect. Tony didn't just smile with his mouth; he smiled with his eyes.

"I'm not saying things like ghosts, demons and spirits don't exist. Trust me, I believe every word you told me about the weirdness in your apartment. What I'm saying, albeit a little clumsily..."

That was something I always loved about him. He used words like "albeit" in casual conversation. None of the Sensoryfeed addicts and couchsurfers I hung around with said things like that.

"...is that if ghosts and spirits exist, they're not supernatural. If they are real, then they're part of the natural world. We just don't understand how they fit in yet."

After a generous sip of wine for me and another smile from him, Tony was forgiven.

I'd been out of the closet for two years when I met Tony. In the intervening time I'd been the worst kind of cliche. Clubbing, sleeping with anyone who'd have me and casually dating manipulative assholes.

My sister, Abby, finally sat me down one day. My head was reeling from another neon night jumping around a dancefloor and popping pills. She told me I looked like hell, smelled like a combination of body-glitter and B.O. and insisted I grow up. Abby had a friend, you see. A nice guy, a smart guy. The kind of guy who took life seriously.

So it came to pass that I fell madly in love with this nebbish scholar after just a few weeks of dating.

We had some good years. Great years, actually. Once he'd finished his masters and I my bachelors, we got a place together and nested. Well, I nested. He mostly read and occasionally painted a wall.

I got a job as a researcher for a public Audiofeed station while Tony managed to score a great teaching gig at one of the best universities in the country. He attended two classes a day, and spent the remainder poking mental holes in the fabric of the universe on the school's dime.

Each night I'd arrive home and whistle to announce myself. Tony would whistle back. Invariably I'd find him reading away and scribbling notes, a glass of wine always resting precariously close to some precious tome that promised the secrets of the universe.

I'd chide him about how impractical it was to flip through all those dusty old almanacs and paper studies. With his scroller he could carry every word ever written in his pocket. He'd tsk me and give me a grin, as if he and the yellowing pages of his books shared some precious secret.

Nevertheless, he'd always kiss me hello. Not just one of those habitual pecks. A real kiss, one that said more than a thousand theses or essays ever could.

We'd then curl up on the couch to enjoy whatever he'd concocted for dinner and I'd watch the Feed while he graded assignments. On very special nights, a newsreader on the Feed would announce that the haze had receded enough. The shroud could be retracted safely for a few hours.

We'd go out to the balcony and gaze at the heavens from under a quilt. Tony would babble on about how the universe was formed and I'd tune out the individual words. I just enjoyed feeling his voice emanate from his chest as I lay my head against it.

More often than not we'd fall asleep that way. When we awoke, the shroud would be above, parsing our world from the skies once again. Tony's look would become wistful, even funerary as he pondered the artificial shield. I never minded it so much. The sky would be blue, the clouds white and wispy. True, it was just a digital projection, but it was pretty.

In Tony's case, however, no beautiful rendering could ever match the real thing.

I've come to believe that craving for something more is what stole him away from me.

It's hard to say when exactly it all started to deteriorate. My life with Tony wasn't one of intense passion. It was gentle, steady. In such relationships, the changes happen so gradually that one could be forgiven for not noticing.

At least that's what I tell myself.

Tony was working on some research project. Evidently he'd found a decades-old experiment in one of his ancient books and the possibilities had him acting giddy, even a little manic. He nattered on about plains of reality and perception. As per usual, I tended to switch off a bit and just enjoy the boyish excitement in his voice.

Before long, instead of our customary whistle, I'd come home only to be greeted by an empty living room, the typical glass of wine already drained. Tony and his



colleague, Chan, had set up shop in the garage.

The exuberance of discovery slowly mutated into obsession. I'd bring some tea and snacks out to them and ask how the project was going.

All I'd get from Tony was a curt "Fine, honey" and a kiss on the cheek if I was lucky. Then he and Chan would go back to bickering over some calculation scribbled on the massive white board that had displaced my car from its space in the garage. The walls were a mosaic of blueprints, maps and strings of numbers that made my head spin.

Tony and Chan were in their own world, one which I was very much not a part of.

Some nights I'd wake up to find myself alone in bed. Venturing downstairs I would invariably find Tony back in the garage, studying his calculations as if appraising a masterwork in a museum.

"Couldn't sleep," was the rote response I would get whenever I asked him about what he was doing. That came as no surprise. The dark circles under his eyes had become a permanent fixture on his formerly handsome face. He was losing weight as the project had taken precedence over our sacred meal times.

Even the nights when the shroud was retracted were spent working enclosed in the garage. I would stargaze alone, fighting back tears. I remembered the things he'd talk about as we studied the heavens together. When I confronted him about his absence from these formerly special nights, I was met with hostility.

"The shroud will be back up," he said tersely. "That joke of a sky will power on and we'll be back in our shitty little bubble again."

I yelled at him then. It was a long time coming. The awe I once held for his intellect gave way to rage. His dismissal of the word "supernatural" on that first night came to mind. He was brushing me off in the same way. This time though, there were no gentle explanations or assurances. All I could feel was his cold indifference as he cut my rant short

by answering a call from Chan on his scroller.

Feeling more alone than I ever had, I recalled something Tony said on one of our nights together, huddled under the quilt and studying the night sky.

We'd been discussing the afterlife. I contended that the notion that we simply blip out of existence upon death is terrifying. He'd given one of his crooked smiles and said he didn't think of it like that.

"In a way, we've always existed," he told me. "Matter is essentially eternal. It's been there since before time, and it'll be there long after the last synapse of your brain goes out."

"What part of that do you find comforting?" I was mildly incredulous.

"You, me, everything on this planet, everything in the universe, we're all just temporary arrangements of the same stuff," he replied confidently. "We all formed out of pieces of other things.

When we die, we don't disappear. We simply disperse and become part of other forms of existence." I rolled my eyes.

"Yeah yeah, the Circle of Life, yada yada."

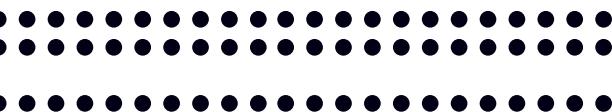
His face turned grave.

"It's more than that. It's not just life. It's not just this planet. It's everything. Our components all boil down to the same basic building blocks."

An extended finger led my eyes to the dim points of light piercing the darkness above us.

"We're all made of stars," Tony said, his voice full of reverence. "And even with that damn shroud, someday, we'll go back to them."

How strange to think that the same man was now buried in piles of notes and theorems while those stars awaited him just outside. Tony was possessed with some feverish hunger that I couldn't begin to understand.



The last night I saw him the shroud had been pulled back over the atmosphere. The artificial cosmos shone brilliantly but I now saw it for the illusion that Tony always had. Along with accepting that sad fact, I resigned myself to the knowledge that the man I lived with was no longer the one I loved.

I entered the garage with the intention of telling Tony that it was over. Dread churned in my stomach as I braced myself. I fully expected him to wave me off and return to his work.

Unsurprisingly, he was on the scroller with Chan. Something had changed though. While gaunt and pale as ever, Tony's face was different. The giddiness had returned. He was hunched over a map as he chattered away excitedly. I only caught a bit of the conversation.

"I'm telling you, it's here, Chan! I found the fucker, finally!"

The map, a giant foldout artifact, was splayed across Tony's work bench. It presented a nearby state park. Black Xs made with magic marker dotted dozens of different coordinates. At the nexus of two points in the southeast of the map Tony had drawn a dark circle.

"Okay, twenty minutes. Yeah, yeah. See you then."

As he hung up he turned to me and grinned. It was jarring as I couldn't remember the last time he'd even hinted at a smile.

"We...we need to talk," I began.

Before I could continue, Tony halted me with a passionate kiss.

"I know," he replied when he finally pulled away. "But there's something I have to do first. It's big, honey. Bigger than anything."

His eyes were sparkling in a way they hadn't in months. I hesitated, feeling a heat rising in my heart that I'd missed terribly.

But no, I couldn't put this off just because he'd had a

breakthrough with his work. I pushed him away with a gentle hand to the chest.

"No, I'm not waiting for you and Chan to finish doing... whatever it is you're doing."

His face dropped, softening with empathy.

"I've been an ass," he admitted. "I know I have. But this isn't just about Chan and me. It's about you and everyone else in the world. I'm sorry for the way I've been, but I swear to you things will be different. I just need you to trust me this one last time. Things are about to change."

The hurt, the rage, the jealousy; all were still roiling around inside me. But the look in his eyes held them at bay.

I sighed.

"I need to know what's going on with you," I said, my eyes cast downward.

"I'll explain everything when I get back," Tony replied. "I promise you."

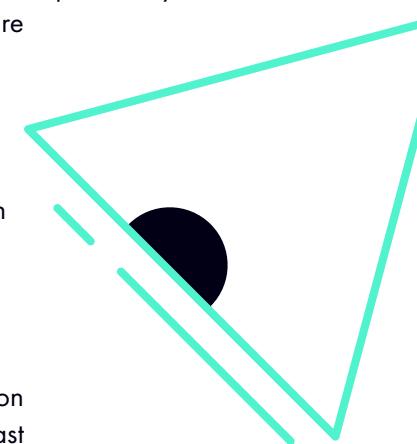
The will to fight anyone, let alone Tony, has never been one of my defining characteristics. I simply looked on as he folded the map and went out the door.

That was the last time I saw him.

Despite assurances that he'd be back in the morning, I awoke alone yet again. As the day wore on, not a single call from me was answered. I tried Chan as well. Silence.

Pacing around the garage, my stomach in knots, I tried my hand at comprehending the cacophony of scribbles surrounding me. Numbers have always been my kryptonite. It was all gibberish to me.

Words are easy enough though. Above one indecipherable formula on the whiteboard Tony had



scrawled three words:

*"Piercing the membrane."*

What membrane? As far as I knew, membranes had more relevance to biology than physics. Was it a play on *piercing the veil*? Even if it was, what the hell was he talking about?

A chill swept over me as I thought of the shroud. It was there to protect us all but Tony had always regarded it as a personal adversary.

The markings on the map flashed through my mind. I'm no engineer, but I knew the shroud was generated by thousands of hubs spread across the globe, most of them in remote areas. Areas like state and national parks.

Was that the big discovery? Had he found a way to sabotage the shroud with one of these hubs?

No, I told myself. Obsessive and strange as his behavior had been of late, Tony was no domestic terrorist. Tampering with the shroud could mean millions of deaths, maybe more.

No, my thoughts repeated. He would never. He could never.

The police arrived promptly after my call. I told them everything I knew, which was slim at best.

Over the next two weeks, search parties scoured the state park. For the life of me, I couldn't remember the coordinates Tony had circled, only the general vicinity. Lot of good that did us; it was hundreds of square miles. Tony and the also-missing Chan were two needles in the proverbial haystack that was the massive forest.

Abby and I were among the dozens who trudged through the woods day after day. While we searched along with Tony and Chan's families, the police pursued "other possibilities."

I knew what they meant by that. Unsubtle implications were uttered when I filed the missing person's report. The cops were clearly operating under the assumption that Tony and Chan were romantically involved and had

simply run off together.

This assumption was quashed when a scroller transaction made at a nearby motel popped up on the feed. A room had been rented by none other than Chan. Evidently he'd checked in about a week after he and Tony disappeared into the night.

The authorities investigated, no doubt expecting to find two lovers hiding out together in the throes of a torrid affair.

Instead, they found Chan dead and very much alone. They tell me he was hanging by his belt from a ceiling fan.

While all indications pointed to suicide, I was politely informed that I was not to leave town as both Tony and I were persons of interest in a possible homicide.

The weeks of searching and hand-wringing had left me sapped of any capacity for outrage. I simply felt nauseated by all of it.

A few days after the discovery of Chan's body, I received a parcel in the mail. It was one of maybe four or five pieces of paper mail I'd received in my entire life.

The unassuming manila envelope was addressed to me in tidy, precise handwriting. Definitely not Tony's. I recognized it immediately. I'd stared at that penmanship for weeks in the garage.

This was from Chan.

Once ripped open with shaking hands, two items fell from the envelope: A handwritten note and a map; the very map that Tony had scribbled on with such excitement.

Tears sprang from my eyes as the reality of what I'd just received washed over me.

The note was brief, the penmanship matching that on the envelope.

"Dear \*\*\*\*\*,

I am sorry. None of this was supposed to happen. Tony and I didn't understand. I made it out while he didn't and



*I will never forgive myself for that. Believe me when I tell you that he loved you more than anything.*

*If you decide to go after him, follow the map. You'll know when you're there, I've seen to that.*

Chan

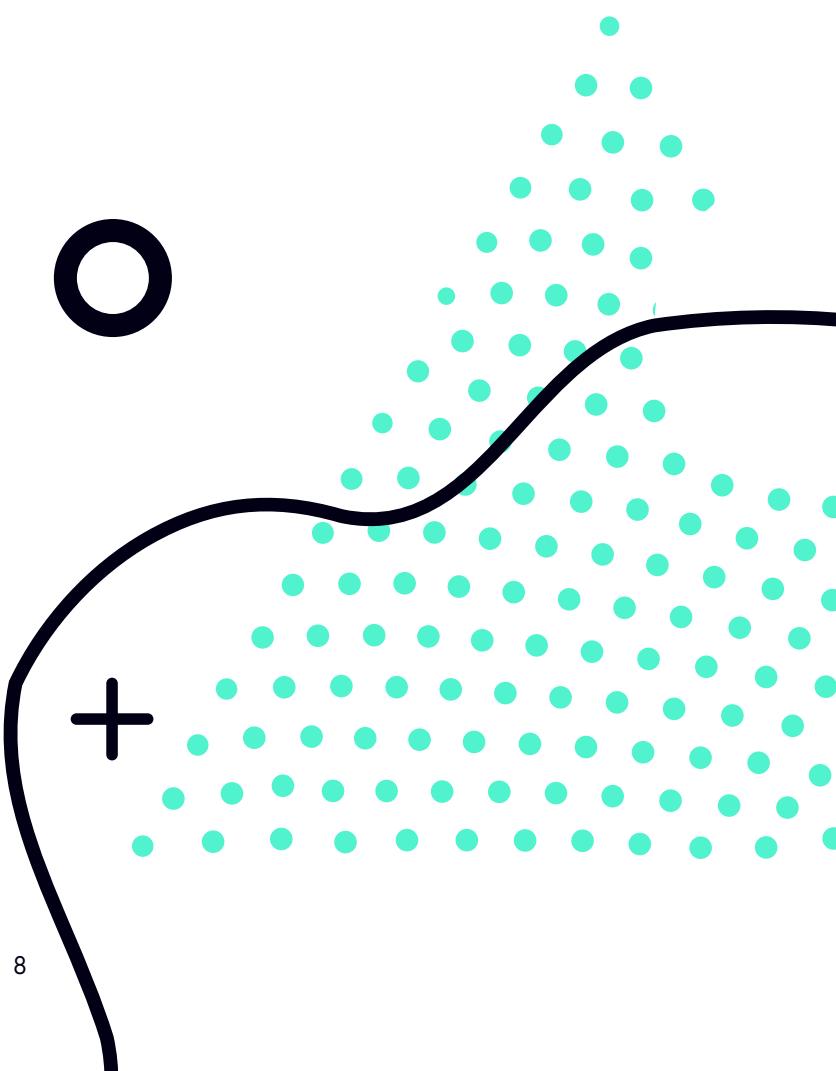
*PS If you open the membrane, DO NOT enter. I'm only telling you any of this so you'll understand what happened."*

I read the words over and over, trying to suss out their meaning. *The membrane*. That term again.

After numerous attempts at divining the note's meaning, I gave up. Chan, in an uncharacteristic act of sentimentality, had given me a piece of the puzzle. He'd left the rest up to me.

Like the love of my life had on that last night together, I folded the map and made my way out the door.

**TO BE CONTINUED**



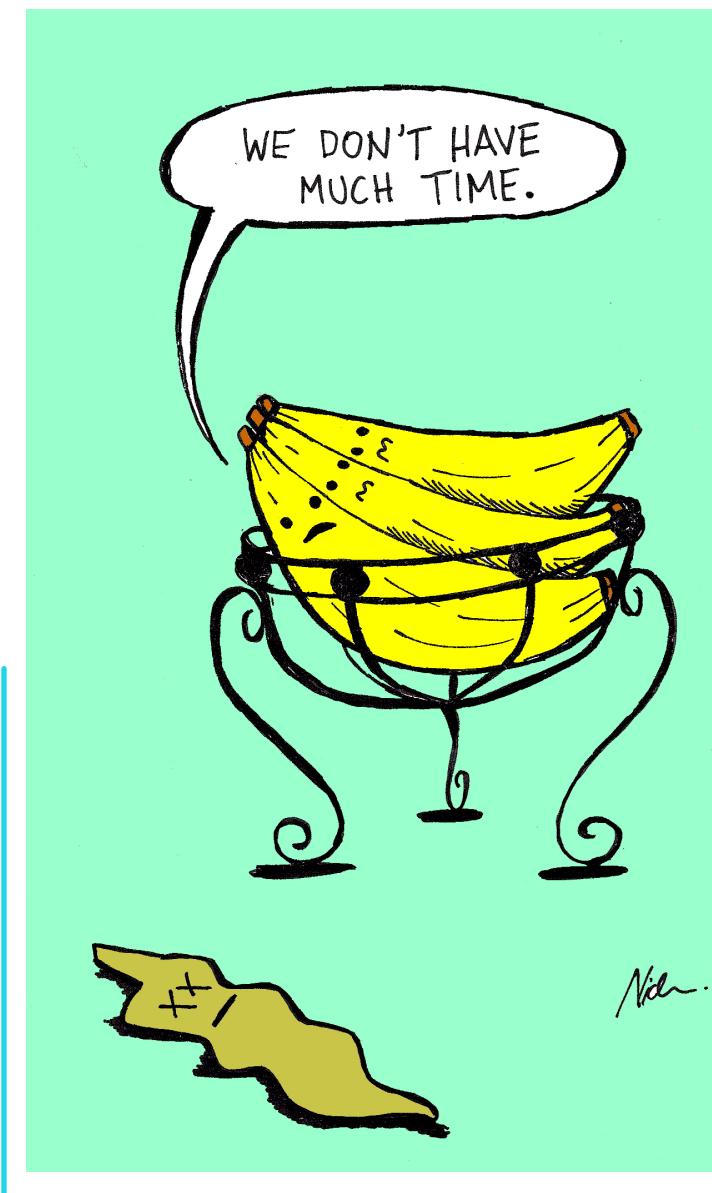
# IT WILL OR WON'T WORK OUT

*Nick Bachan*

I think about the future constantly. The idea that things will happen that are currently unknown to me is both exciting and completely terrifying. It's not even the "Where do you see yourself five years from now?" kind of thinking that gets me most of the time. It's the "How will you end this very sentence you just began?" anxiety that infiltrates the minutes and hours of my day. We're shaping the future with every action, every text message, and every person we decide to let in or let go.

I'm never more invested in how the future will play out than when I find myself in a new relationship. A budding connection of any kind with another human being or a group of people makes me start writing a hypothetical screenplay. Sometimes it's a love story, but human relationships span many genres. I've written suspense thrillers featuring hostile co-workers, buddy comedies with cameos by my closest friends, and witty romantic comedies featuring "the one" of the moment.

To boil my fears about the future down to one action, I'm always afraid I'll say "I love you" too soon. I worry that I'll show up expecting the best only to be humbled by what was always only okay. I also worry that things will always



shake out as "only okay" because of something I did too eagerly or avoided doing to feign that coveted sort of aloofness. My future amongst the living—and probably the dead—is always some degree of doomed due to my manufactured chill or natural lack thereof.

I was completely surprised and at ease the first time a partner said "I love you" before I did. We had been seeing each other for an exciting, reassuring, future-forming six months. One night, we were lying in her bed, her head laying on my chest while we talked. Physically and figuratively, her words were aimed directly at my heart. In my mind, our future had been written the second we kissed in my car on our first date. Since that moment, I was all too ready to throw my script away—until she pulled a page directly from it and read her lines perfectly.

"Do you know what I'm thinking?"

"What?" I asked.

"I think I love you."

This was the future I wanted. I couldn't believe it was possible. I knew that I loved her, too, but I wouldn't have said it first. Like anyone in his/her late twenties, I was holding onto my vulnerability tightly.

Life rarely agrees with our imagined futures, but the rules didn't apply that night. Her words were a gift that muted my cynicism. In keeping with the script I had drafted months before, I was ready to hit my mark.

"I love you, too."

There was safety and hope in it. There was also the palpable realization that each of our futures had begun to matter to an entirely new



person. I think we were both humbled by the prospect of embracing someone's wholeness. I'll always be grateful that we approached love this way because it taught me how things look and feel when I am safe with a partner. As our relationship progressed, we constructed an entirely new future as two people in love.

The narrative of newfound love is co-written as high fantasy. To subscribe to the idea that two bodies, hearts, and minds could completely align—wanting the same outcomes across all aspects of human desire—is to believe in magic. In reality, making two futures one is the work of a lifetime. The daily reality, which can be wonderful if we embrace it, is that long-term companionship is anxiety for two.

Making plans with a significant other relieves the future of one of its most plausible outcomes—complete, uninterrupted solitude. The inevitability of being alone fuels a significant amount of my anxiety. I spend my days preparing to go it alone while silently hoping I ultimately won't.

The phrase "I love you," when uttered sincerely by this particular human being in the privacy of her room, was apparently the cure for my existential limbo. We went all the way from push notifications indicating a mutual attraction via a dating app to discussing lease options with the property manager of my apartment complex. We grew to rely on the knowledge that a warm body and heart would understand us even in our worst moments.

We adopted the cutest dog. We posted the most adorable selfies on Instagram. We knew each other's rhythms during parties, fancy dinners, and trips to the grocery store. We knew how to charm the crowds at her folks' place in the country and my folks' place in the suburbs. We took long drives just to extend long talks and then took long naps to make Saturday afternoons last forever. The future was exciting because we were co-authoring it with love in mind.

Planning for a future full of love is a privilege. Most of the time, human beings plan for the future based on fear—our continued survival against a number of odds being the only metric of success.

Before I moved in with the first love of my life, my parents tried their hardest to inform my future with their pasts. Their list of concerns spanned everything from my modest bank account to my delayed graduate school applications. I used to hear their hesitations as obligations, but it is undeniable that a future exists in which I will be at a loss for not figuring out the things they have. When they were the most concerned about my well-being, I was selfishly in love and seemingly invincible to the dangers and punishments of the world.



I cited generational differences to support my confrontational reaction when my parents voiced their concerns. I imagined that there were differences between the brave, refreshing kind of love I was feeling and the caricatures of love for which other people seemingly settled. I respectfully listened to the concerns of the people who raised me while already having signed the lease in my mind. The idea that I had found a true partner was enough to make me demand specific things from my future. Anyone challenging those things, even my own family, registered as a threat.

Once we moved in together, I thought I would always be the exception to my partner's general uncertainty about the world. It turned out that her tangible commitments to me made her question her purpose. She began to suffer from panic attacks. She also felt trapped by an increasingly conventional, prescribed life. The seven years between us revealed themselves as a time-stopping chasm that had always existed. We had just managed to infatuatedly tiptoe around it. After moving furniture up three flights of stairs, we were eager to change everything yet again. That's not to say there weren't wonderful times. I have enough of a reference point for sustained cohabitation with a monogamous partner to keep my romantic side on life support.

We sometimes fought about the dog we adopted because we were both dealing with depression in our own ways. Those fights always made me think about how we'd asked a small, scruffy animal to depend on us while we clumsily built something together. Since neither of our futures was based in enough reality, our collective one had an expiration date. We had been true to ourselves as far as we knew those people, but our future counterparts were always waiting for us. We weren't fully formed enough to acknowledge the future we couldn't have. Eventually, we realized we needed to be

apart. It was a "back to the drawing board" conversation for the ages.

She decided to move far away - so far away that she now resides in the wilderness and raises wolves. My future after she moved included things I'd gotten accustomed to doing prior to having long-term company—but now there was a dog. I'd never imagined such a future for myself because I didn't grow up with pets, but I'm so glad that my plans are meaningless because I love my four-legged companion. Taking care of



an animal and feeling the ways in which one can take care of you will heal you in ways that make the worst possible futures eternally conquerable.

My level of anxiety is directly proportional to how much of the future will seemingly be affected by my decisions. I often miscalculate, and I've managed to eradicate entire relationships with the smallest decisions. For example, I once lost an entire friendship over a vague text message about meeting up for a movie. I was treating the plan as just one little movie date with a close friend—in other words, a person I was more

likely to take for granted. It's funny how the security of closeness can make us more flippant in our day-to-day interactions.

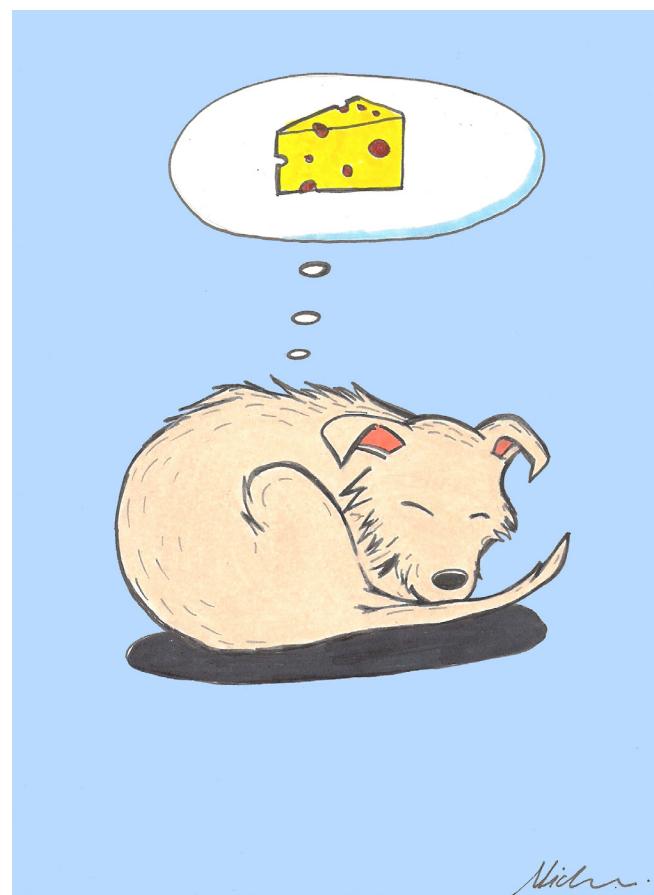
In my mind, our movie plan lived squarely in the "tentative" zone. My former friend, however, saw our plans as an opportunity to reveal just how difficult life had been for her over the several months leading up to our scheduled meeting. She had been making a go of it in Los Angeles, and the isolation coupled with professional pressures to succeed in such a competitive place made for a crushing curriculum of life lessons. I'd heard about these lessons over dozens of late-night phone calls while she drank wine, ate fast food, and hoped for the best while laying on her living room floor.

She didn't come back to town to see a movie with me. She was in it for the extremely valuable conversation we were scheduled to have after the movie. I didn't intuit the itinerary, and I will regret that forever. Even when we're close to someone, disclosures of vulnerability must be deliberately requested in the spaces between conventional social plans. For us, seeing that movie together was going to be a gateway to a higher level of companionship. She was at her lowest and I was clearly in a place where I could afford to be passive. Having been at my lowest since that day, I realize that I'll never appreciate the magnitude of the damage I did over one flaky weekend. Our entire future was at stake, but I had no idea.

I let our get-together hang on the detached tone of some vague text messages. I eventually decided to ditch our movie plans altogether in favor of seeing some other people that weekend. Maybe I didn't think I could offer what I subconsciously sensed she needed. As empathetic and sensitive as I pride myself on being, I had found myself completely oblivious to the fact that I was telling my friend I did not care about her. Several apologetic text messages, hurt feelings, and revelatory therapy sessions later, it resonated that my actions had claimed one genuine human connection and therefore

erased a part of my intended future.

When we make plans, we don't think about the "how" as much as the "what." We want houses, material things, the love of others, children, respect in our professions, and acceptance. Even though the wanting of these things propels so many of our decisions, we don't think about the mundane realities of working toward them. The future is conceptually powerful because it's where dream jobs, dream partners, dream outfits, and dream markers of validation can



live comfortably. They can live there forever if we're optimistic enough. Redrafting the future is difficult, but it is a core skill we must develop if we hope to truly be accountable for our lives.

We often measure our levels of happiness using the future as a reference point. If a good future is likely, we allow ourselves to be happy in the present. If you can "see yourself" in a place "five years from now," you've supposedly



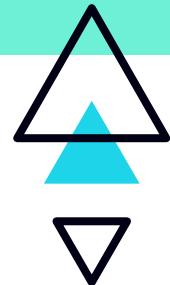
landed your ideal job. If you can wake up and choose to try loving someone “til death do you part,” congratulations! We structure and sign mortgages as though so much is guaranteed. We adopt pets like they’ll be there for our entire lives. We’re always avoiding and accommodating the future at the same time. I think this is why the notion of “living in the moment” carries weight. We’re always considering the next several moments as opposed to the present one that gives us control. Happiness—or contentment, rather—seems to be about striking a healthy balance between looking around and looking ahead.

My parents changed their entire lives to secure what they assumed to be a better future for me and my brother. We moved from Trinidad & Tobago in the Caribbean to Texas in the United States when I was 12 years old. That was in April, 2001. By September, 2001, the future of America as a country had shifted dramatically. Naturally, my family’s expectations did as well. As an adult, I find myself appreciating more and more just how much my parents sacrificed—and continue to sacrifice—to preserve a vision of the future they decided on long ago.

Life, as we’ve been conditioned to live it, feels

like it’s split into two parts—the part when you secure your future and the part when people assume your future is set in stone. The securing years are all about getting good grades, adding extracurriculars to a multi-page resume, attending a reputable college, and establishing your talking points for recruiters, potential mates, etc. The “it’s a given” years—spanning our twenties, thirties, and beyond—force rediscoveries and harsh truths that all but destroy the idea that we can control where life takes us. Your resume also has to be consolidated to one page, because future-you mostly matters when convincingly abbreviated.

Once I turned 22 and graduated college, I felt as though I was unleashed upon the world with a mediocre toolkit for building a new life. I was the first person in my family to go to college in the United States. I attended a highly competitive business school and I was therefore poised to succeed in a corporate structure of some kind. That was what my future looked like on paper. As soon as I could afford to be, I became stubborn about living a creative life. I enjoy making art, telling stories, and loving deeply. Each year since college has marked a complete redefinition of what my future looks like. Some



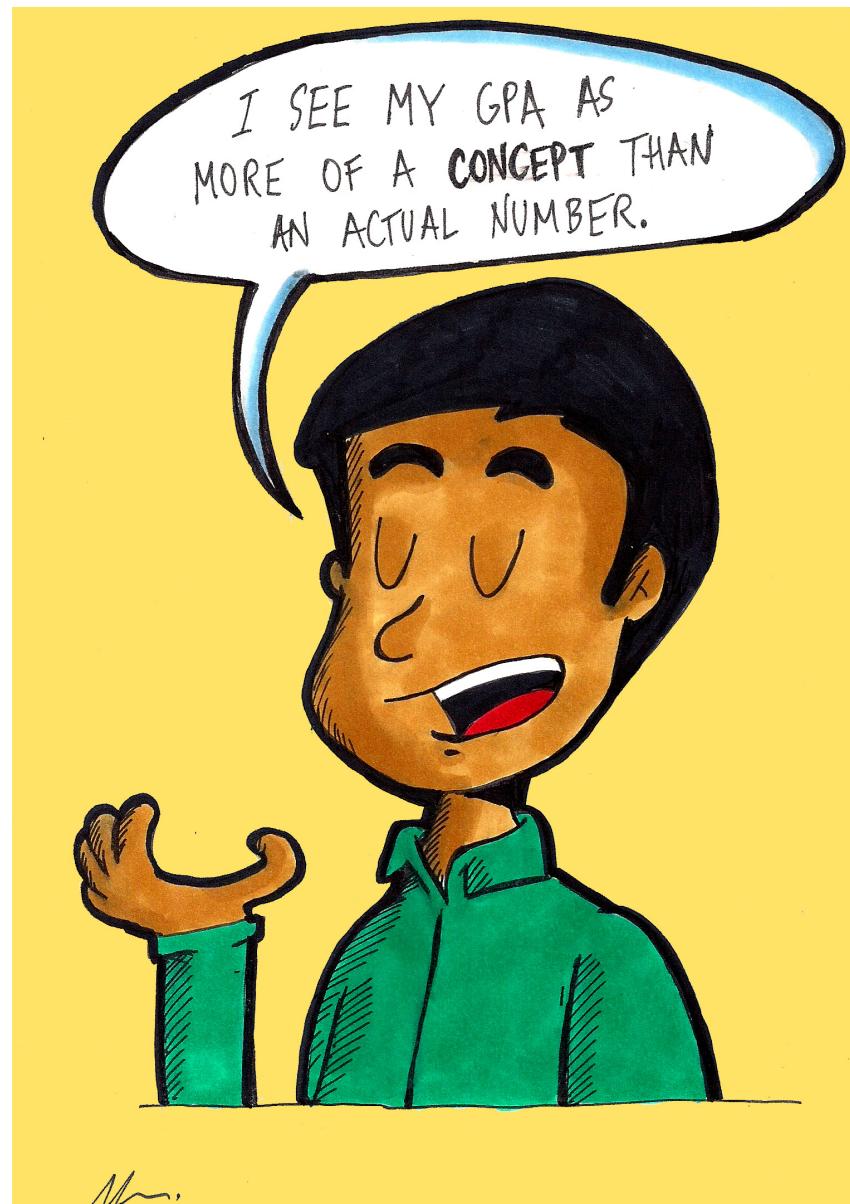
would consider this approach to life unstable, namely my parents. They frequently marvel at how many things I consider disposable once my heart leaves them. I jump from relationship to relationship and between vastly different career paths, but the only thing I want from the future is for the ingredients of my existence to be authentic.

Love and fear are constantly clashing as drivers for my actions, and I spend a lot of time wondering where I stand in many aspects of my life. Maybe this is because I've been trying to build a foundation for myself in a foreign country while feeling performatively estranged from my place of origin. My future feels fluid because I don't have a base of operations. To me, the picture of stability is an admittance that love is difficult to find and that a "dream job" is a completely subjective idea. As the years go by, though, the idea of a prescribed future becomes more seductive. The passage of time is the force that gives meaning to making the future as predictable and fulfilling as possible.

I observe my parents maximizing interactions with relatives who fly to visit them, stretching those moments of belonging the way my partner and I used to stretch Saturday afternoons. They want those times when the world makes sense to last forever because their future once included staying in their home country and nurturing long-term bonds within their community. West Indian colloquialisms, music, cultural norms and food don't exactly know where to sit comfortably in a North Texas suburb. I'm glad my mother and father can take at least one flight back to the Caribbean each year and be greeted with sights and sounds that rejuvenate their sense of identity. They became Americans so me and my brother could become what they believed Americans to be. I haven't been back to Trinidad for more than ten years. It's only home in the sense that I began to physically exist there.

I feel anxious about the days when my parents don't have each other to keep their once-imagined future alive. They create it together

each day, and it's endlessly romantic to me that love can enable that. Either of my parents, left alone, might simply be a stranger in a potentially hostile place. I've already accepted that my future will involve protecting and sheltering them from a world I may understand better than they will.



The "better future" my mother and father imagined for their children in the United States was based on economic and educational opportunities. Things have been a huge success in terms of us having the means to say we live

comfortably. Now we mostly wrestle with questions of identity. As a result, my parents have joined me in my newfound ideas about what finding love and being truly satisfied in my career will look like. I often have to look in unconventional places and engage in conscious introspection to find my path. My parents are aspiring alongside me, but they are also constantly worried about my increased risk for heartbreak and disappointment. In all of my meditating about what the future means, I still haven't dared approximate how much those visions change when a person becomes responsible for other human lives. I'm eternally grateful for a life full of pondering, loving openly, and sincerely considering my passions as vocations.

Moving to another country just before finding myself as a person implanted the idea that the future could be reset or manipulated under the right circumstances. It also solidified the idea that the future is always compromised when you go out of your way to do the predictable thing. I've worked hard to sustain that opinion in my journey as an artist. The 2001 versions of my parents did not imagine a future in which their eldest son could be so seemingly improvisational about his own. Ironically, I've ended up being the person I am because they boldly secured a future for me that's characterized by freedom. This is why it's fascinating that one institution designed to imbue the future with complete certainty that has been on my mind as of late—arranged marriage.

I'm surprised by my evolving perspective on the subject of my family finding me a partner—mostly because the arranged marriages that have occurred in my family's past have stripped several women of their agency regarding their individual futures. Over the years, however, I've seen examples of how arranged marriage can make two people very happy.

The future is uncertain and love feels even more uncertain as we get older. The idea of someone telling you who your future partner will be actually seems like a foolproof remedy for a particular

kind of anxiety. It's clear that companionship from that point forward--regardless of a union's nature--works just like it did when I moved into an apartment with my girlfriend.

An arranged marriage would promise the the same scary future offered by a non-arranged one. The main difference would be treating the first stress-inducing step of finding a mate as collaborative—and it would be funded! According to Hindu tradition, the bride's family would help me and my new partner establish



a solid economic foundation as we started our new life. Talk about locking in a hypothetically secure future.

Being a person in the world long enough shows you exactly how tangible realities like money can change the shape of love. Chosen occupations, lifestyles, hobbies and beliefs all skew the soul's long-running love algorithm. I've been wondering whether my choices have set up a future with terms I simply won't accept. In true "starving artist" fashion, I long for romantic relationships that honor and nurture each



party's earned sense of identity. I don't want to compromise when it comes to love, so it always feels impossible.

Feeling physically and emotionally distant from truly worthwhile connections--especially during these supposedly more predictable years of my life--adds appeal to the idea of turning love into a mundane procession of concrete, formal actions. Still, there's no accounting for chance. The future often decides to surprise us just when we set our expectations in stone.

Several months ago, I set my OKCupid app's geography settings to "Literally wherever, you tiny computer!" and I struck up a conversation with a 98% match living in another country. Over the months we've chatted, a connection has formed. The chief ingredients for emotional chemistry have been witnessed and explored. There's a slow-burn intimacy that feels a bit like home. Even across so many miles and a somewhat reliable wi-fi connection, we've started to expect futures that may or may not occur.

If I weren't expecting my future to be infused with passion, chance, and authenticity, would I even be open to a long-distance prospect? That bold, stubborn artist in me is the one pursuing this connection—but the terrified person that already saw one romantic future crumble is also finding hope in this prospect. For better or worse, this app-originating connection feels special. I am willing to construct the framework of a future with this person as long as she is

willing to do the same. More importantly, I'm grateful for the knowledge that my imagined futures haven't been permanently squashed by the world's harshness. The fact that I even did the geographic experiment with my OKCupid app in the first place reminds me that my cautiously mapped out future will always be punctuated by bold, inexplicable choices.



*"IN A SENSE, I'M THE ONE WHO RUINED ME. I DID IT MYSELF."*  
- HARUKI MURAKAMI

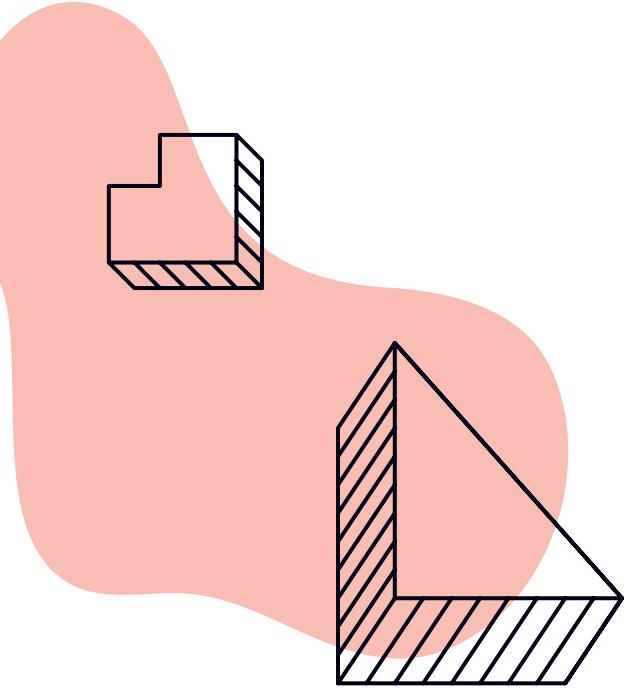
When it comes to building futures with other people, we're always playing with fire. Taking foolish chances is the only mode of engagement if we ever hope to experience the futures we dream about. Pursuing important things is a guaranteed way to break our hearts into resilience, but what we can never know is the proximity to our next heartbreak. To actively be human is to both plan for five potential scenarios and secretly expect that there are three

more. The idea that people continue to live, hope, and build concrete things after being dealt a number of strange hands by fate is incredible and inspiring. We can only live intentional lives if we embrace the value and courage in having a plan.



# JUST FOR TODAY

*Kyle Risley*

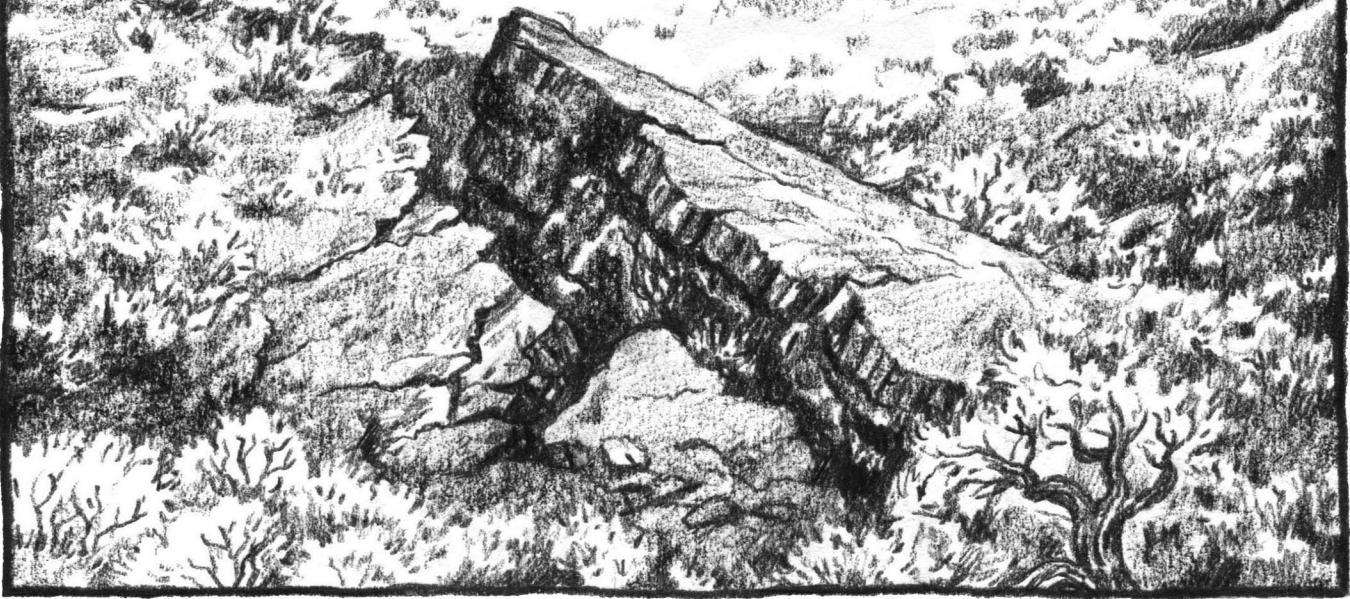


Today she is no longer messing around with sandwich baggies, stamped glassine, twisty ties, picking up the phone because of a false positive w/r/t vibration, pill mill road trips, entering and almost immediately exiting parked cars, doctor shopping, hail mary phone calls, mysterious origins of product, or brokers with charcoal circles around their extinguished eyes.

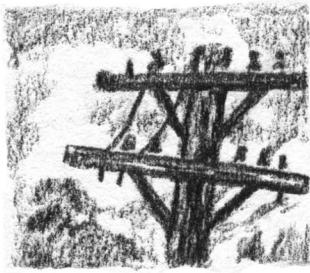
She is now getting used to opaque black plastic shopping bags, crisp white jackets, pharmacy grade X without a script, business hours, picking up deodorant too since it's on sale, showing ID, providing a John Hancock, late night ads for legal X, and eyes equal parts concerned and sympathetic from the tired retail clerk.

Still present and accounted for are the capability of rationalizing the impossible, hypersensitivity, being unable to distinguish love from hate, a cosmic level of self-centeredness, dread, an oscillating sense of what is real, sensing one's body floating forward slowly but without effort, waking up beneath a blanket of ear splitting anxiety, purchasing the very same thing that was flushed or disposed of the day before, the perception of time as circular, no longer linear, drinking coffee with strangers in church basements, hospital cafeterias, VFW halls, undecorated bedrooms, and the queer notion that even if this game were played one hundred times the outcome would never vary.

# TEPHRA



IT WASN'T TIL THE DEAD OF MY FIRST WINTER THAT I STARTED RAMBLING IN THE LOGS. UNTIL THEN I'D KEPT IT ALL DULL AND CLINICAL, KNOWING EVERY SCRAP OF TEXT IN MY BRICK WOULD BE UPLOADED PROMPTLY AT MIDNIGHT. MY FIRST INFRACTIONS STEMMED FROM BOREDOM- COLLOQUIAL MIS- SPELLINGS WERE AUTOCORRECTED, SO I STARTED SUBSTITUTING HOMONYMS JUST TO ENTERTAIN MYSELF.



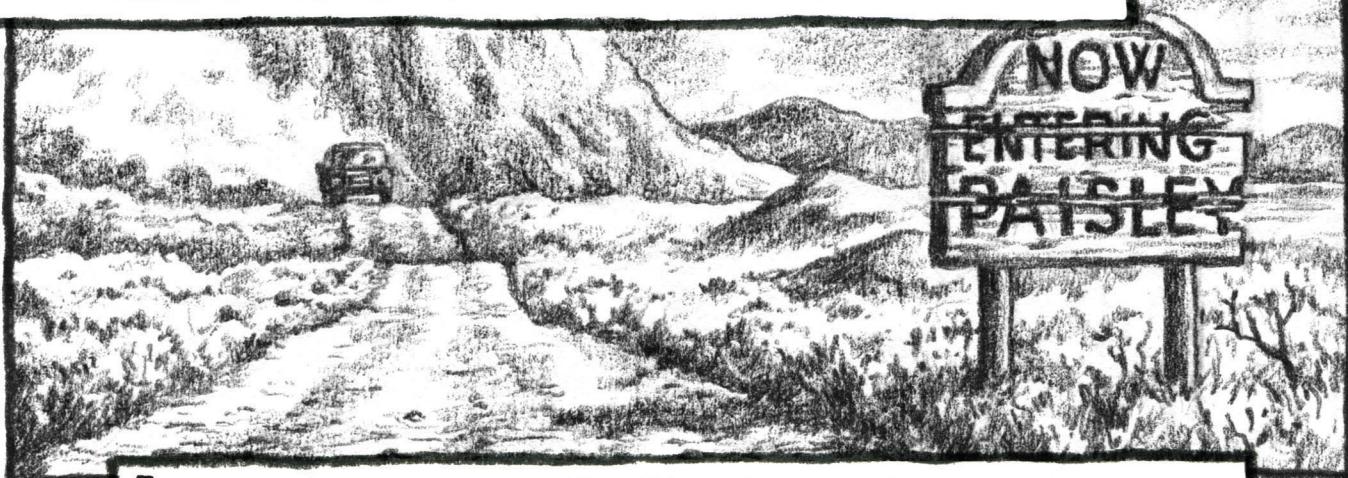
Sector 12- afternoon dunder-strums. Afterwards, partly clotty sky. Saw hurt of envelopes one hundred strong



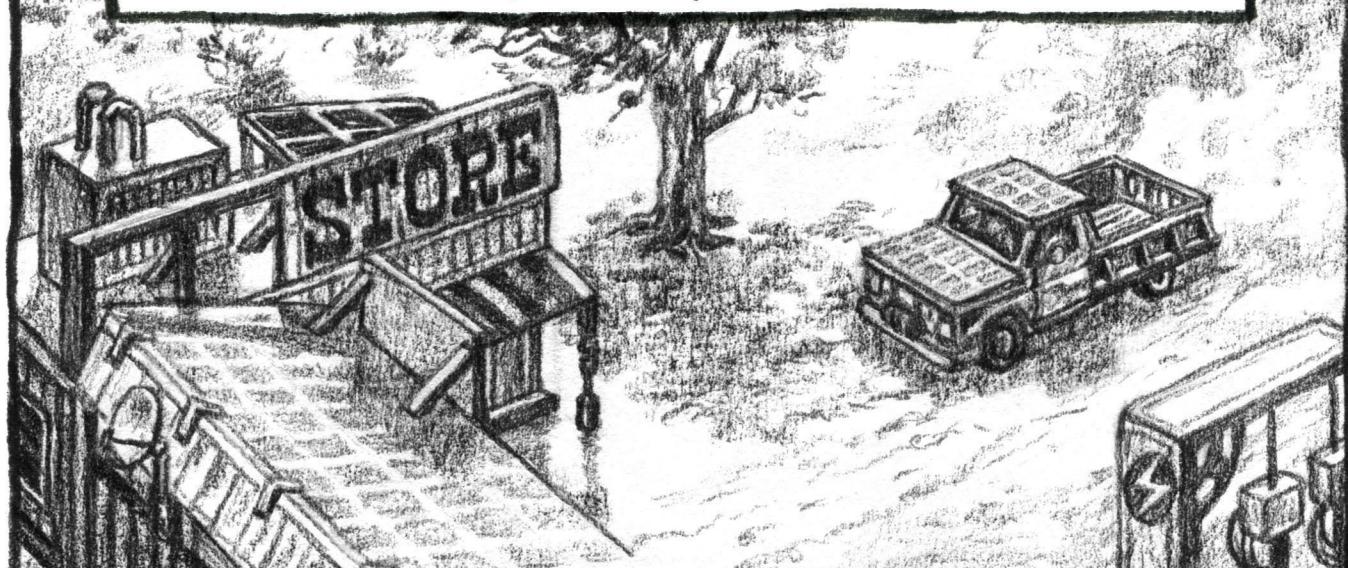
I WAITED FOR SOME INDICATION OF RUFFLED BUREAUCRATIC PLUMAGE THAT NEVER CAME. THE HUMAN MIND IS OVER-RAVENOUS FOR PATTERN, AND RELIEF AT DODGING A BULLET CAN QUICKLY BECOME A BELIEF ONE CAN DODGE ANY BULLET. I STARTED SCREWING AROUND, MOSTLY HARMLESS STUFF. I'D HOLD HALVES OF FAKE CONVERSATIONS WITH THE BODYCAM WHEN WORK REQUIRED IT BE ON. SOMETIMES AN EVENING REPORT ARRIVED IN RHYMING COUPLETS

THEN ON A BLEAK NIGHT JUST BEFORE THE EQUINOX I WROTE SOME DARK, MURDEROUS SHIT. A ROUTINE PATROL HAD TAKEN ME PAST A POCKED, ROOFLESS BARN HIDING SEEDLINGS OF PROSCRIBED CASHCROPS.

WHEN THE PLANTERS FOUND ME BURNING THEIR HANDIWORK ONE TOOK A SWING AT ME, SO I UNSLUNG THE WEATHERBY AND BACKED THEM OFF. ONCE BACK AT CAMP I CAMOED MY GEAR, GOT WHISKEYED PROPER, AND POURED BLACKSTRAP BITTERNESS INTO THE EVENING REPORT.

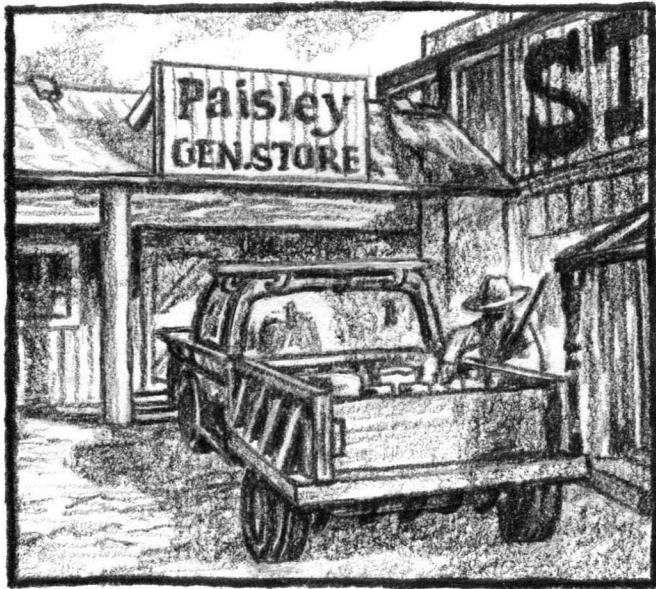


I FELT DEFIANT HEARING THAT PING ANNOUNCE THE MIDNIGHT AUTOSEND BUT THE FOLLOWING MORNING THE NYSTAGMUS SPUN BACKWARDS AND I STARTED PANICKING. SHORTLY AFTER ELEVEN MY BRICK CHIRRUPED FOR NEW MAIL. THE MESSAGE, BOGGLINGLY, WAS STILL THE SAME FORM REPLY-

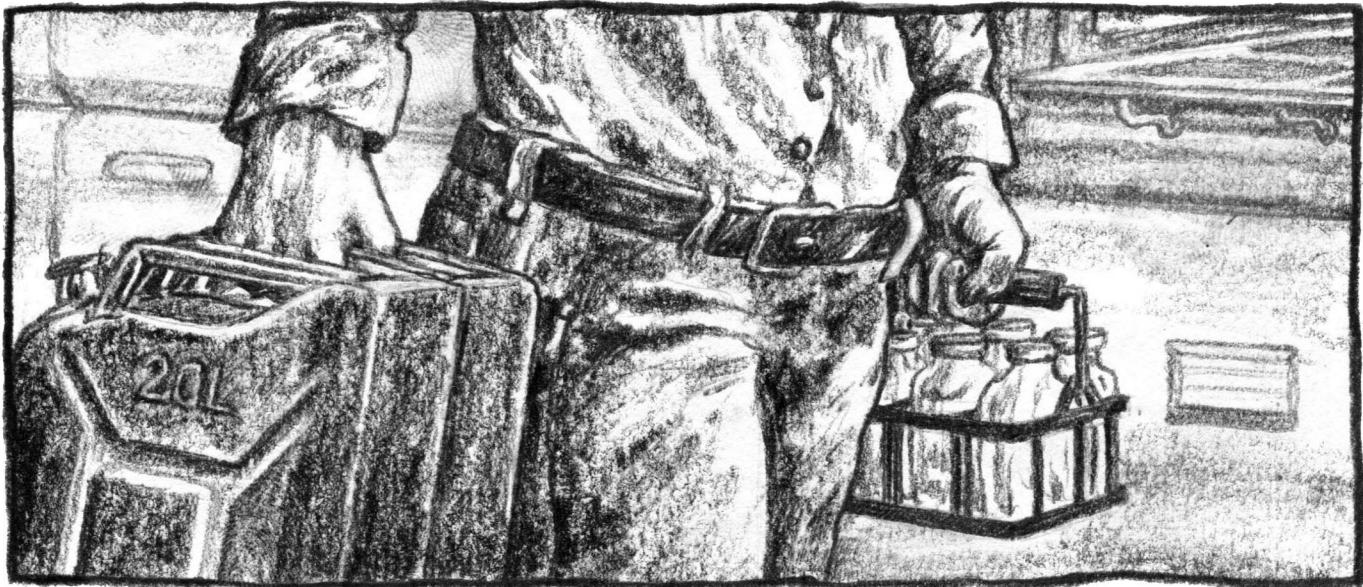


Agent (xxxxxxx)

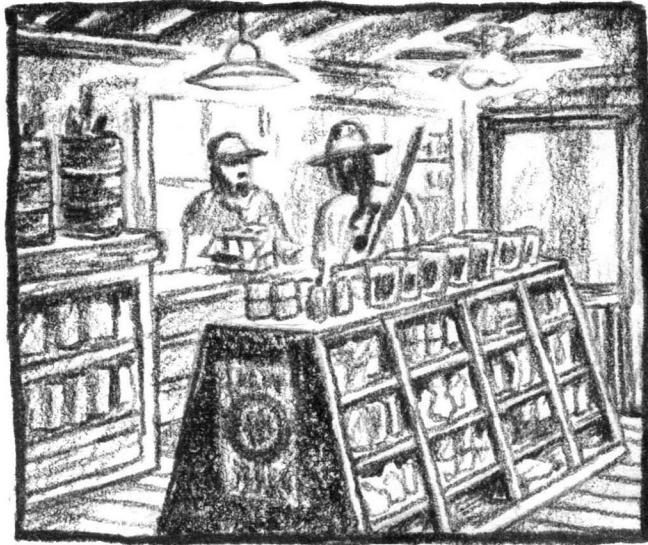
Your daily log(s) for (xx/xx/xxxx) have been read and catalogued. On behalf of the Nation and its future inhabitants the BLM thanks you. Keep up the good work.

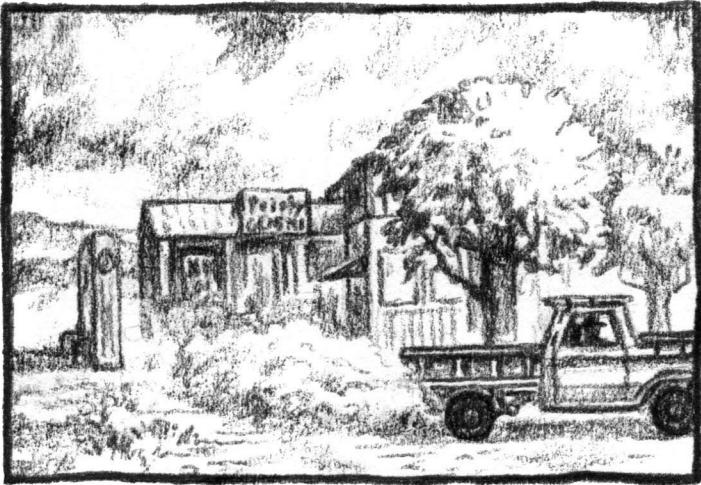


UNTIL THE INCIDENT WITH THE GAME BIRDS I RECEIVED NO FEEDBACK WHATSOEVER AT THIS POINT I'D EUTHANIZED MANY AN UNLICENSED DOMESTIC, AND DONE MOST OF THEM 'OLD-FASHIONED' (WE DIDN'T TELL THOSE OUTSIDE THE PROFESSION WE CALLED IT THAT). THERE'RE A SHITLOAD OF OLD GUNS FLOATING AROUND THESE DAYS, BUT PRECIOUS LITTLE AMMO IS MANUFACTURED. WE'RE NOT SUPPOSED TO SHOOT WHAT WE CAN HACK OR BLUDGEON

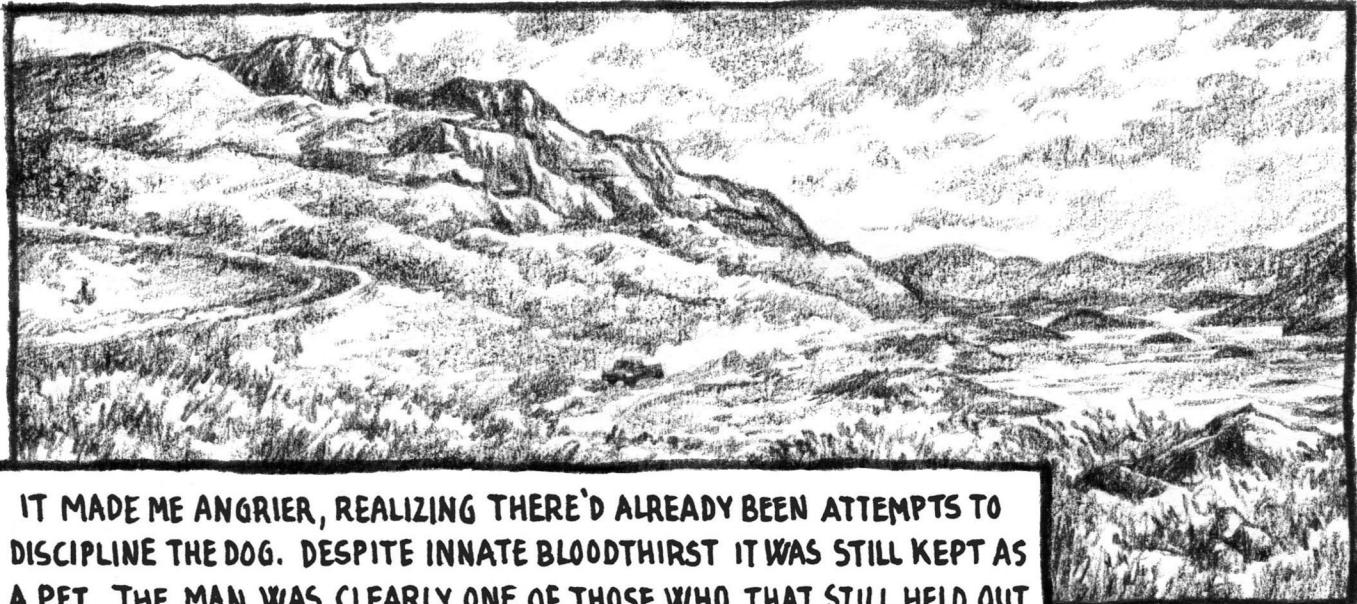


I KNEW THERE WAS A QUICK DOG IN THE AREA, OR MAYBE A BIG CAT - TOO MANY QUAIL DEAD AND TOO FEW OF THEM EATEN. AFTER A DAY OR TWO OF FOLLOWING VULTURES I FOUND A MALE; THE FEATHERS SPUN WRONG IN TINY RIGOR, THE SPILT BLOOD IN THICK RIVULETS AND STUBBORN, DUSTED GLOBES. MY ARRIVAL SCATTERED THE VULTURES IN MID-DESCENT, SO THE CORPSE WAS UNATTENDED BUT FOR A FEW BURYING BEETLES.

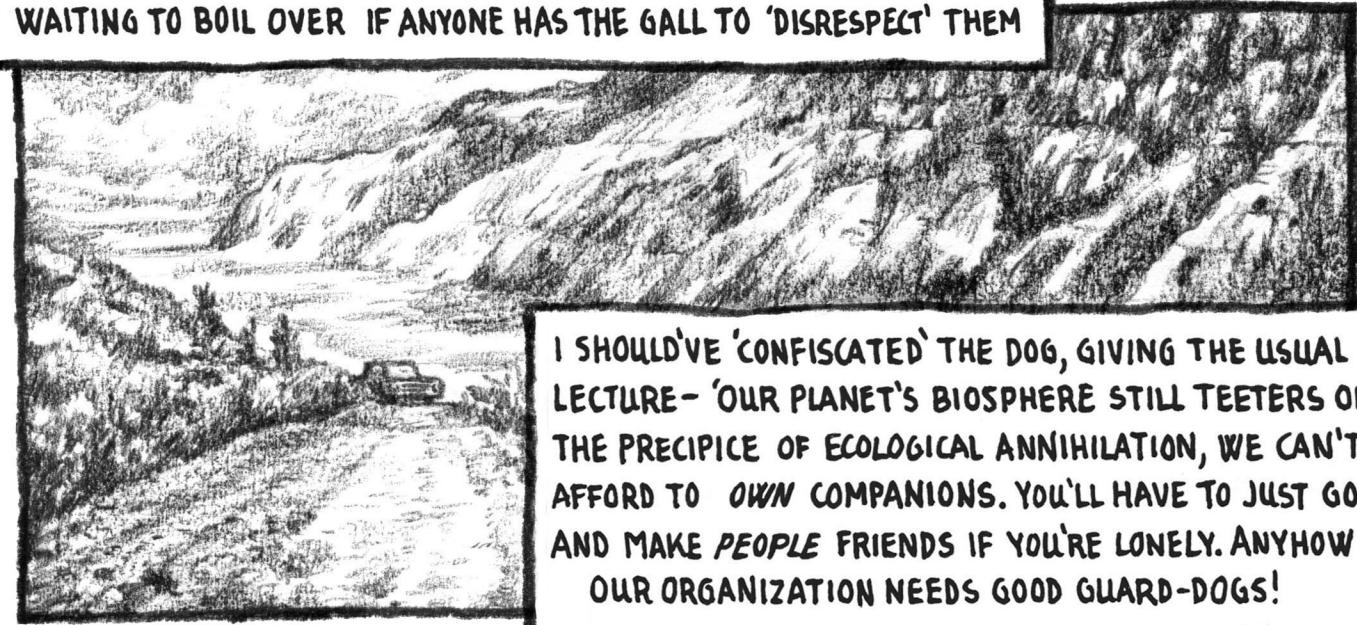




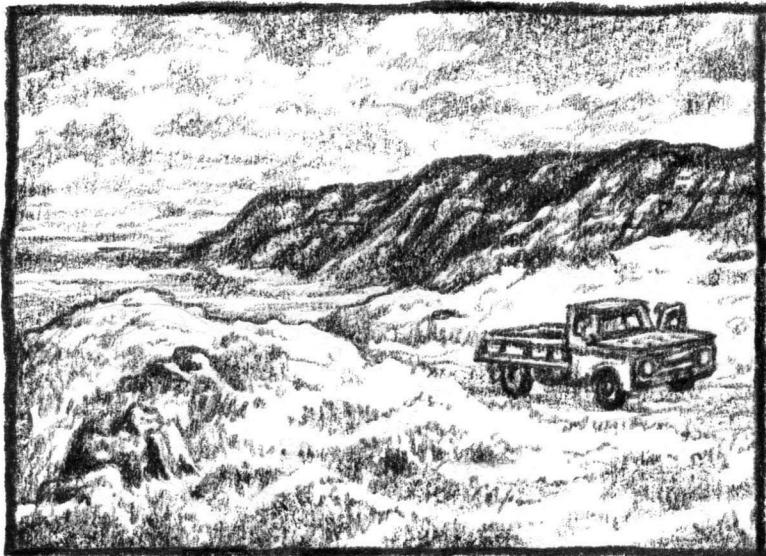
IT DIDN'T TAKE LONG TO TRACK THE MUTT BACK TO A SMALL HOUSE; NOT ENOUGH BARE ROCK TO HIDE FOOTPRINTS. AS I APPROACHED, IT DROPPED ITS KILL AND SNARLED IN DEFENSE. WHEN IT GLIMPSED ITS OWNER STEPPING OUTSIDE THE TAIL TUCKED AND IT POINTEDLY IGNORED THE Mauled LITTLE BODY



IT MADE ME ANGRIER, REALIZING THERE'D ALREADY BEEN ATTEMPTS TO DISCIPLINE THE DOG. DESPITE INNATE BLOODTHIRST IT WAS STILL KEPT AS A PET. THE MAN WAS CLEARLY ONE OF THOSE WHO THAT STILL HELD OUT FOR THE OLD DREAM: HOUSE, COUCH, TV, DOG, AND A WELL OF IDIACY WAITING TO BOIL OVER IF ANYONE HAS THE GALL TO 'DISRESPECT' THEM



I SHOULD'VE 'CONFISCATED' THE DOG, GIVING THE USUAL LECTURE - 'OUR PLANET'S BIOSPHERE STILL TEETERS ON THE PRECIPICE OF ECOLOGICAL ANNIHILATION, WE CAN'T AFFORD TO OWN COMPANIONS. YOU'LL HAVE TO JUST GO AND MAKE PEOPLE FRIENDS IF YOU'RE LONELY. ANYHOW OUR ORGANIZATION NEEDS GOOD GUARD-DOGS!



I BARELY HEARD THE CRACK OF MY RIFLE BUTT BEFORE THE WRETCHED THING STARTED WHIMPERING. A FEW MORE BLOWS DIRECTLY BEHIND THE OCCIPITAL AND THE STAGGERING INBRED DROPPED INTO THE DUST. I THREW THE BODY INTO THE TRUCK BED, HOLDING THE GAZE OF THE DUMBSTRUCK OWNER. I WANTED TO CRACK HIS SLACK, STUPID JAW FOR DARING TO BE HORRIFIED.

LIKELY HE'D'VE BURIED THE WET BUNDLE OF FLESH THAT SAME NIGHT, FIRST PRESSING INTO HIMSELF WHATEVER WARMTH AND SOFTNESS REMAINED. ALL THAT MOISTURE AND PROTEIN WOULD'VE SAT HIDDEN, BAKING IN DRY EARTH TIL SUN AND WIND SCATTERED WHAT THE LIVING DESERT COULD USE IN TOTALITY.



THAT NIGHT I SLEPT FITFULLY IN A TENT A HALF-KLICK FROM THE TRUCK. I LEFT THE HATCH DOWN AND IN THE MORNING THE CARCASS WAS GONE AND THE BED LICKED CLEAN. CLEAN. I DROVE THE 100 MILES INTO TOWN, THINKING I'D BE FIRED FOR MISCONDUCT AND SENT BACK TO THE HELL OF THE CITIES. IF I DIDN'T STARVE I'D FIND A WRETCHED JOB ATTENDING SOME MACHINE, WAITING FOR ITS PARTS TO CRUMBLE OR ITS SOFTWARE TO FAIL, WIPING THE ASS OF SOME GENIUS' ALUMINUM AND SILICATE PROGENY

I SLOUCHED INTO HEADQUARTERS NECK BARED FOR THE AXE, BUT ALL SEEMED NON-PLUSSED BY MY PRESENCE. I WASN'T DUE FOR AN IN-PERSON-REPORT/SPECIMEN-DUMP FOR ANOTHER THREE WEEKS. BEST CASE SCENARIO, I EXPECTED THE DIRECTOR TO BEHAVE LIKE THOSE CLERIC WHO ASPIRE TO WORLDY UNDERSTANDING; "ALL HAVE SINNED, MY CHILD." SUPERIOR SLAPS WRIST WHILE SILENTLY COMMENDING HERSELF FOR MERCY



MY VOICE BROKE A FEW TIMES AS I GAVE MY ACCOUNT, I STROVE IN VAIN TO MIRROR HER COOL IMPASSIVITY



EZRA  
BUTT  
2017

WHEN SHE SPOKE, HER VOICE WAS STOLID AND DELIBERATE. APPARENTLY MY DAILY LOG AND BODYCAM REEL HAD ALREADY BEEN SCANNED BY THE UPPER ECHELON, AND NOTHING WAS FLAGGED AS UNSEEMLY. SHE RESTED HER DRY, COOL HAND ON MY ARM, SUFFOCATING WHIMPERS LIKE A LID OVER A CANDLE. "SOMETIMES," SHE SAID, "RAGE IS THE APPROPRIATE RESPONSE."

# LEU495

LEU495's reactivation was a rare contingency come to life on an empty freeway overlooking North Las Vegas. An authorization signal bounced off a positioning satellite in high orbit, relaying mission-critical information and software updates, which LEU495 immediately began to parse.

Federally-assisted cleanup efforts had failed to improve the breathable air in downwind Clark County and the locals--already sick and showing symptoms of prolonged exposure--had begun to regard the crews with a violent contempt. No remaining human working for the Nevada State Guard would step foot downwind without expensive protective equipment, and so in an effort to lower operational costs, several hundred previously-mothballed law enforcement units were reactivated to run protection and suppress criminal activity.

Many of the other reactivated units were derelict, and subsequently unable to move.

A start-up systems check revealed corrosive damage to LEU495's right orbital sensor array, an empty ventricle lubrication reservoir (along with three empty reserve tanks), a sub-optimal memory degradation rate of 89.2%, and a variety of outer-dermal scratches and nicks.

Over the years, passersby had assumed LEU495 for dead, piling stones on its shoulders and carving their names into its chassis with sharp objects. A proximity threat assessment detected the urine of 41 distinct humanoids and six different animal species against its legs, but no

hearts beating within 300 yards.

LEU495's ocular shade slid open with a ping and it searched for the horizon through thick sheets of debris. Counting visible fuel fires and measuring the ratio of oxygen to carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, it estimated that there were more than 2.1 million human survivors living in the downwind sections of Las Vegas--a number confirmed by the orbiting satellite after a computational delay.

While testing its ability to walk, LEU495 noticed the glow of a hydrogen fuel reaction against the pavement, and spun its head around to determine the source.

The immensity of the completed Third Nevada Biome surprised LEU495. Before its deactivation, intel had deemed the biome a distracting vanity project, only good for inspiring compliance in the unevacuated populace. Three decades later--the orbiting satellite explained--the biome housed 743,822 individuals of considerable familial wealth, all sealed behind thick glass walls with enough uncontaminated plant material to sustain themselves for 117 years.

It appeared to float above the surrounding downwind zone, its massive supports planted in four distinct craters in the desert. Settlements flowed down into each valley and ran up the length of the biome's legs. A nest of haphazard cabling ran visibly from building to building, plugging into the biome's support structure at key points, syphoning power.

LEU495 gripped a nearby guardrail with all 16 of its articulating fingers to steady its balance and calculate a course of action.

Orders were to patrol a four mile stretch of downwind North Las Vegas, document evidence of suspected drug trafficking activity, then determine and arrest the suppliers. At the completion of its task, LEU495 was to report for a prompt decommissioning.

It walked along the shoulder towards an exit ramp, and into the fallout.

Descending into the remains of the old city, LEU495 gathered information about how the remaining downwind population was getting along. The first wave of radioactivity had rendered forty percent of structures too dangerous to enter, its databanks recalled, so survivors had gathered inside fortified layers of the largest remaining buildings, each community depending on federally-distributed biomass generators for warmth and utility.

These units produced steady pyres of beet-red flame that rose out of exhaust chutes atop each fortification. They burned day and night.

Anxious commuters wrapped in plastic and burlap hurried from fortification to fortification, not looking up long enough to notice LEU495, who crossed to the sidewalk and moved towards its assignment.

Privately, LEU495 compared the situation to that before its deactivation and found both the environment and rewards for compliance to be considerably harder to live with.

A crowd of shrouded figures loitered in a nearby yard, kicking a ball. "A bot!" one of them shouted, noticing.

LEU495 stopped and turned towards the group. "Hello civilians, I am here on behalf of the Nevada State Guard to protect and serve."

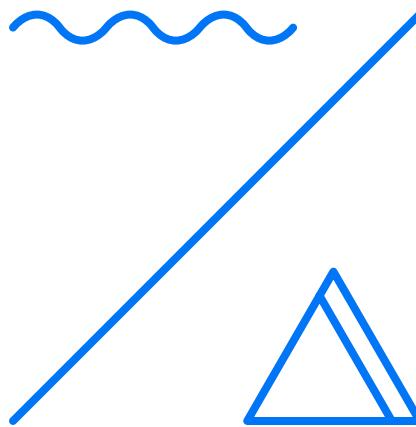
A woman laughed and gestured towards her companions.

"Would you get a load of this fucking bucket?" She turned to face LEU495. "Thinks there's anybody here worth saving."

Her neighbors laughed and one of them picked up a stone, throwing it and hitting LEU495 in its right lower leg joint. A rapid assessment measured no damage and, given the circumstances, no necessary citation.

"I'll be on my way, civilians, but please obey the law," it told them, and moved along.

LEU495 passed the hollowed-out shell of a shopping mall, its stores long ago picked clean for supplies, their signs disassembled by scrappers collecting valuable filaments and gas.



Around the corner, a federal cleanup crew approached the remains of a casino, each wearing a rubberized jumpsuit and thick-soled boots. Their faces were unrecognizable as human behind heavy rebreather masks, and they moved in disconcerting lockstep.

"This is the one," one of them drawled. "Command has marked this structure for resettlement. Set up a perimeter and begin decontamination."

The workers, some of the best paid human contractors left in the city, each planted a metallic anchor in the street and activated them with a button press. As the power supply units on their backs hummed, they marched through a hole in the side wall of the building.

LEU495 engaged an 8x ocular zoom in an effort to parse operational details.

Each one pointed a baton towards the gambling hall and from them emerged streams of brightly-charged particles. They tore a path through the darkness in search of atmospheric partners until the crew allowed the glow to dissipate, stepped forward another ten yards and repeated the reaction.

The commander turned to look at LEU495--who immediately continued walking and began calculating

the terminal velocity of its various components to appear otherwise distracted.

LEU495 tried to determine how this technology might positively affect breathable air, but when it contacted the orbiting satellite for background information the request was promptly denied. Instead, the satellite told LEU495 that its destination was only a half mile ahead and urged it to dedicate additional power towards walking quickly.

LEU495 scanned the road as survivors dragged their well-wrapped children towards tenements on either side. The settlement fell into evening, generator exhaust painting the sky a deep, juicy red. LEU495 detected several sets of inquiring eyes peering out of windows in its direction.

A ten-story tall cement fort loomed in the distance at the road's end. On its side hung a massive rotating spotlight, which cast and dispersed shadows in the courtyard below. The evening's last shoppers flowed in and out of the structure's base, carrying bundles of rations, cartons of uncontaminated water and scrap plastic used to seal leaks.

While recording pedestrian movements into evidence, LEU495 noticed a phalanx of armed guards standing a hundred yards up on the left. They were accompanied by an personal protection unit of a configuration unknown to LEU495, who frantically scanned the bot's various shiny armaments with an infrared beam.

Following protocol but hoping for kinship, LEU495 also sent a short-range communications request to the bot, but this garnered not even the slightest acknowledgement. Such behavior was not just against protocol but highly unusual; something had gone wrong, so LEU495 contacted the orbiting satellite for intelligence.

"Configuration V35B, military grade man-killing automaton capable of firing 100 armor piercing rounds in 2.3 seconds with exceptional accuracy," it replied.

LEU495 asked for the robot's individual designation, but the satellite ignored this and moved on to other requests.

"Dora, you battered shlub—" a visibly sick man barked, putting down his bag and smacking one of the guards in the shoulder affectionately.

Having already entered the designated patrol zone, LEU495 considered engaging its cloaking device, but opted to leave it off and save power.

"Do I know you?" the guard asked, gripping her weapon tighter.

"Dora, Dora, my old friend," the man said quietly, patting the guard's shoulders with an increasingly desperate fervor. "Can't you spare a dying man an hour inside?" The man's eyes scanned the guard's pleadingly, hand resting on her collarbone.

"Remove your hands and back up," she responded.

LEU495 didn't recognize the insignia on the V35B's conical head, but its movements reeked of techno-fascism.

"Please my fr—" but the guard cut the man off, pressing the stub of her weapon into his gut and administering an electric shock. He yelped and fell to the ground, frantically gathering his belongings.

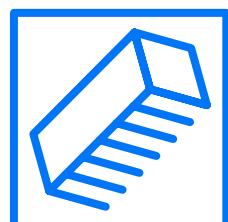
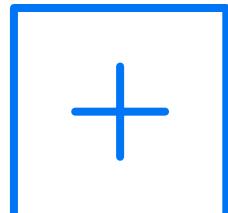
LEU495 approached as the man scurried down the road, holding his wound.

"Contractor, that was an unauthorized assault on a civilian," it told her. "Such behavior is not tolerated by the Nevada State Guard."

The V35B approached stealthily, its sleek black chassis reflecting the red of the exhaust flames. It stood 3.1 meters high, 17% taller than LEU495, and appeared to be held together by bolts made from an extremely resilient new alloy.

"McCoy, get a look at this," the guard called to her compatriot, who walked over and stared shamelessly at LEU495's articulating, pneumatic pelvis. "Haven't seen one of these since I was on the force."

"You are under arrest, contractor," LEU495 said, drawing handcuffs from its utility compartment and extending an arm in the first guard's direction, soliciting her surrender.



"How the hell is it still running?" McCoy said, balancing against the butt of his rifle.

The guard did not move to surrender, and the V35B seemed to grow taller in its silent servitude.

"Want to take it apart and find out?" the guard said, ignoring LEU495's attempt to peacefully apprehend her. "And spend all that time searching for the right wrench?" McCoy replied. "Just scrap it"

"You have given me no choice contractor," LEU495 inserted. "Please do not resist arrest."

It moved to restrain the guard but had barely budged a centimeter before one of the V35B's heavy arms came crashing down on its head, causing an instantaneous system reboot.

When LEU495's ocular shade slid back open, it was down the road, in a heap of junk. The guards were still standing at their post. The V35B haven't even bothered to transmit a post-incident report.

Determining its mission guidelines to be more critical than subduing the overzealous local authorities, LEU495 rose from the pile and decided to focus on recording suspicious activity. The mercenaries were unlikely to be guarding the area for the good of its inhabitants.

The temperature dropped precipitously, guards switched shifts and most of the remaining civilians went inside as the haze turned cold. Light from the fort poured down the road and weaved its way between buildings. LEU495 conducted a material analysis of the civilian fortifications and determined them insufficient to prevent long term exposure. Stragglers--too sick from breathing in harmful particulates or driven too mad to care--took shelter in the neighborhood's darkest corners.

No matter how LEU495 ran the numbers, excluding the population of the biomes, all human life in downwind Clark County was doomed.

A scream broke its computational silence and, tracing it to an alley behind one of the tenements, LEU495 rushed to help. It found a man in a state of total mental and physical disrepair. Most pressingly, his foot had recently been impaled on a metal spike.

"YEEEOOOWWWWW!" he continued to scream despite LEU495's increasing proximity. Trying not to further startle the man, it released a mild nerve agent into the surrounding air.

"Hello civilian," LEU495 said, stopping to assess the damage. Blood poured from the man's foot and splattered all over the alleyway as he thrashed. "I am here to help you, please remain calm."

"YYEEEEOOOOOWWWAAAHHHH!" the man screamed, even louder this time, the nerve agent having limited effect.

LEU495 yanked the man's foot off the spike in one smooth motion.

"AAAAHHHH GET IT OFF GET IT OFF," he said, struggling, as LEU495 cauterized his wound and bound it with bandages.

"This will hurt for several weeks," it told the man. "During that time, try to remain stationary and get plenty of rest."

*No matter how LEU495 ran the numbers, excluding the population of the biomes, all human life in downwind Clark County was doomed.*

"YOU FUCKING BUCKET, GET AWAY FROM ME," he replied and yanked his foot away from LEU495, smacking the sides of its sensor array with open palms. LEU495 pressed eight of its articulating fingers against the man's chest and held him back.

"You are in a state of shock," it told the man, who continued to swing. "The pain will soon subside."

With a firm kick to its chassis, the man succeeded in separating itself from LEU495, and ran off.

LEU495 subsequently performed a systems check and was disappointed to discover that its auditory processor had been knocked askew, and it could no longer detect

frequencies above 45 kHz. It submitted a status report to the orbiting satellite, which pedantically told LEU495 to engage its cloaking device and avoid further conflict with the civilian populace. Then it reminded the automated law enforcement unit that its mission objectives could be achieved through nonviolent surveillance alone.

LEU495 complied, but resolved to stop asking the orbiting satellite for its opinion.

Cloaked, it crossed underneath the fort and decided to make a long-term record of the inhabitants' comings and goings. While most of the neighborhood slept, creatures of the night streamed across the courtyard, many exhibiting symptoms of chemical inebriation. LEU495 found an alcove just beside the fort's entrance, folded its legs underneath its chassis and recorded every movement in the vicinity for the next four and a half hours.

11 different vultures landed in the courtyard during that time, either by themselves or in small groups. They picked at the carcasses of two unfortunate field mice, which also garnered attention from a family of rats--a patriarch, a matriarch and four little babies, all in a line.

Six different species of ants had built colonies in the courtyard, coming to and from their mounds carrying bits of food.

As for humans: 63 men, 71 women and four teenagers crossed the courtyard during that time. All of their eyes looked glassy, but the teenagers especially--their movements were slow and laborious, unlike those of the young people LEU495 had encountered before its deactivation. Human culture is always changing and puberty is extremely difficult regardless of circumstances, it recalled from its databanks.

Analyzing the sum of its evidence, LEU495 determined that a higher-than-normal percentage of this foot traffic was routed towards a small structure on the north side of the yard. In all, 21% of individuals who exited the fort headed there next--most emerging again within 20 minutes, their pupils dilated and their breathing noticeably slower in every case.

LEU495 logged this activity into evidence and decided to further investigate the structure, a pre-detonation

convenience store. Decades of soot had caked onto of the facade. The glass from the window had also been harvested and replaced with a trellis of wooden beams covered in a tarp.

Inside, the lights were so low that LEU495 had to manually override its ambient light sensors and adjust its ocular array to detect a wider range of visible light. An assortment of human figures came into focus, strewn about the shop on cots and bundles of rags. Some were chatting quietly to themselves while others laid supine, drifting in and out of consciousness.

A thick vapor hung in the air.

Behind a wooden desk sat a gaunt man with his feet up. Everyone who entered the shop approached and greeted him warmly, then sat down and smoked a powder substance out of a glass pipe. Perched behind a couch in a corner of the room, LEU495 watched him complete 15 different transactions before logging his face into evidence and designating him as a street dealer.

Like most men in the settlement, his unkempt beard covered a thin jawline and a craning neck. His eyes were a heavy shade of grey and his front teeth poked out from under his lip when he rose to greet his customers. His youthful skin was beaten by the wind and his hair was caked with soot. A sandy cloak wrapped around his figure from neck to feet.

"Horace, good to see you," he said, holding a man by the arm.

The customer appeared drunk. "And me you, Ali. Can I hang here? Got family staying at my place right now."

"Of course of course, anytime," the dealer replied, taking Horace's cash and passing him a handful of capsules. LEU495 picked a discarded one off the floor and placed it in its utility compartment for a full chemical analysis.

"They just escaped that fire in Henderson, all of em are covered in ash," Horace said, plopping down on a cot next to a woman who was rolling around in a stupor.

"Glad they're alive," Ali replied, sitting back down behind his desk and kicking his feet up.

"I could take em or leave em," Horace said and the men laughed.

LEU495 watched Horace pull a small glass pipe out of a pocket, load powder from a capsule into it and light the end with a butane torch.

"Whole tower went up in minutes," he said, exhaling.

"What a thing," Ali said, waving to a couple that stood up and stumbled out the front entrance.

Horace took another hit and laid back, his heart rate decreasing. "Glad the whole neighborhood's made of cement."

"Sure sure," Ali replied, "we'll all be fine."

The conversation ended when Horace took one more hit--his muscles eased, and he lost consciousness completely, sinking into the cot.

LEU495 sat silently in that corner for the rest of the night, watching Ali closely as he interacted with patrons, tossed out the unruly, and stopped to read from a little yellow book. The pistol at his hip prevented guests from getting any ideas about his billfold, which sat on a corner of the desk next to a pile of capsules. As the night went on, the pile of capsules dwindled and Ali's billfold grew.

At dawn's first light, LEU495 watched Ali guide the rest of the guests--some of them too high to speak or walk properly--out the door into the street. It followed them out and watched Ali lock the front fastidiously.

The settlement was still--even the drunkards had finally passed out. In the dull morning light LEU495 tried to recall from its databanks what had stood in the fort's place pre-detonation, but having never patrolled the neighborhood before--and shunning further help from the orbiting satellite--it was left to imagine.

Ali walked with one hand against his billfold and the other resting on his holster. LEU495 followed from a short distance, hoping the man would lead him to a supplier, and a fruitful arrest.

Promisingly, he wandered into a dark and empty part of town, and around the back of an abandoned apartment complex. He popped the rear entrance's lock in a way that demonstrated prior experience. The pair climbed five flights of stairs in near darkness, guided only by a crack of light in the doorway at the top. The steps creaked under LEU495's weight but Ali didn't seem to notice, perhaps due to his contact high.

When they reached the top landing and Ali started working on the door, LEU495 prepared a flashbang grenade to subdue whoever was inside. Instead--when it swung open onto an empty roof--they were bathed in light from the Third Nevada Biome, which loomed overhead.

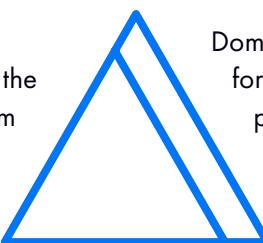
LEU495 holstered its grenade as Ali walked out and climbed on top of a crate. The young man sat cross legged and faced the enormous structure, its light deepening the pockmarks in his skin. After a few minutes of perceived solitude he pulled a capsule out of his pocket and loaded a pipe of his own, smoking and sinking into himself.

LEU495 engaged a 21x ocular zoom to examine the biome more closely.

Behind glass, monorails traversed the biome's circumference, taking air-conditioned commuters to work on the opposite side. All across its underbelly, fortunate families rose and prepared breakfast, pressed their clothes for the day and pushed children out the door towards school. Runners tugged their dogs through the park, stopping to rest under the shade of a tree.

Ali roused himself, and LEU495 followed him off the roof and back down the stairs.

As the settlement woke up, Ali led them to a bubble development on the outskirts of town. He and his family lived in a simple two-room dwelling in a row of similar dwellings. There were 10 acres of houses in their development, all sheltered under a translucent plastic dome.



Domes like this one had been a popular technique for limiting particulate exposure in large suburban populations at a fraction of the cost, but then their manufacturer went out of business, and the maintenance crews stopped showing up.

These days, the dome only served to collect soot and prevent an afternoon breeze.

The continued use of its cloaking device required LEU495 to activate its second-to-last power reserve as it followed Ali through his front door.

"Gabriela," he called out as he entered. Decorations were sparse--the room was filled with half packed bags that said they hadn't been there long, and didn't plan to stay. On a table in the center of the room, an infant slept on a pile of blankets. LEU495 quickly climbed a set of shelves in the far corner, folding its legs beneath its chassis and watching the suspect's every move.

A short woman with olive skin emerged from the bathroom in her underwear. A deep scar ran down one side of her body and it was clear from her calloused knuckles that she didn't shy away from a fight.

"Hey baby," she said, helping Ali take off his cloak and kissing him on a pockmarked cheek.

"How is she?" he asked her.

"Better, but still didn't sleep through the night," Gabriela replied.

Ali rushed over and picked up the baby. Watching her wake up on her father's shoulder, LEU495 realized it was the first child it had scanned in almost 40 years.

"The coughing is getting worse," Gabriela continued, sitting down on the bed. "Just like the doctor said it would."

"My angel," Ali said, holding her in front of him and staring into her wide eyes.

Gabriela picked up a ration bar. "I can't get her to eat this shit," she told him, "I wish I could just breastfeed."

LEU495 scanned the room but found no indications that the couple was supplying or manufacturing the capsules themselves, at least not here.

"We have to see a real doctor," Gabriela pleaded. "One that can get

her right."

The baby coughed and Ali set her down on the mattress. Gabriela stroked her head and put her ear to its chest, listening as she wheezed.

"Where are we gonna take her?" Ali said. "Henderson is on fire."

Having received and processed the couple's facial scans and biometric parameters, the orbiting satellite informed LEU495 of their identities, "Ali Syed, 21-years of age, born in Denver, CO, multiple arrests for fighting, loitering and distribution. Gabriela Orellana, 25-years-old, born in Barstow, CA, served 18 months in the Marines before being honorably discharged for medical reasons. DO NOT ENGAGE SUSPECTS UNTIL SUPPLIER IS IDENTIFIED."

"Did you save any?" Gabriela asked, to which Ali withdrew a half-full capsule and his pipe.

"Tomorrow, tell Goro that you're through with this business," she told him.

Ali coughed up a nervous laugh, "He'll kill me."

"Explain things to him, that the baby is sick..."

"You think he gives a shit? That man's about money," Ali said. "You know who those people are." He lit the pipe and passed it to Gabriela.

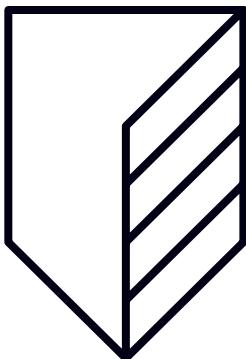
"All that money you bring him," she said, exhaling, "We should just take it."

"Baby, Goro has people everywhere, in every settlement. He will find us, he finds anyone who tries to quit."

They smoked silently.

"At least there's food here Gabby, the fighting's stopped," Ali said in an exhausted tone.

"I'll tell him myself," Gabriela replied, placing the spent pipe on a side table. "Tonight, I'll tell him you found other work, that neither of us are coming back."





Ali smiled, rather stoned, and chuckled at her. "You think he won't hurt you, just because you have these?" He grabbed her left breast and she slapped his hand away.

"I can handle myself," she said. "We can't just wait for Anita to die."

Without answers, Ali said nothing else, and slowly fell asleep. The two of them laid that way for a long time, cradling the baby.

That afternoon, Gabriela rose and silently got dressed. She donned a cloak and grabbed Ali's full billfold while he dozed, mouth agape, their daughter against his chest. Gabriela quietly slipped out the door and into the domed neighborhood, LEU495 following close behind.

The orbiting satellite pinged LEU495, requesting a status report. It transmitted a record of the morning's events but decided to leave Anita, who was only just a child and could not therefore be criminally implicated, out of its logs.

LEU495 followed Gabriela and the billfold out into the haze, concluding that she was on her way to meet this "Goro". Once he was concretely identified as their supplier and apprehended, LEU495's operation would be complete, and it could report for prompt decommissioning.

It followed Gabriela all the way back to the heart of the settlement, which was again buzzing with activity. She strolled confidently through the front doors of the fort, bypassing the guards with a curt wave.

Inside the air was cool, and the labyrinthian hallways forked towards shops and luxury apartments. They climbed the stairs to the top floor. LEU495's leg joints were showing serious signs of wear--including an audible creak--but it was getting so good at quietly climbing stairs at this point that nobody noticed.

The fort's top floor was lavish--gold accents on the light fixtures, an abundance of electricity, even central air conditioning. Gabriela approached room 10F and knocked four quick raps against the door. It opened a crack.

"What's the news?" a man asked, one bug eye peeking through.

"Easy cheese," Gabriela responded and the door swung open.

Inside, a pack of mercenaries--of the same type LEU495 had encountered on the street--were guarding a packaging operation. Teenagers sat on stools surrounding a long table in the center of the room, all of them stripped to rags and donning complex machines on their heads. Cables ran out of the tops of each headset into stationary units hanging from the ceiling, anchoring each worker in place.

LEU495 pinged the orbiting satellite who first advised EXTREME CAUTION, explaining that the "rather remarkable" headsets were used to record everything the underage workers saw, heard and thought while working their shift.

At the far end of the room, flanked by two guards and surrounded by a throng of seedy agents, sat a gigantic man wearing a full suit of metal armor. The blinking lights from the teenage laborers' helmets reflected in the armor's chrome breastplate, and another laborer worked to polish the metal with a small scrap of cloth.

Goro shooed the polishing boy away with a hand as Gabriela approached, LEU495 watching him carefully.

"Where's your route?" Goro asked, looking down at a document in his lap.

"The old bodega," Gabriela replied, handing the billfold to a teenage girl who looked up at her blankly. "But we're through."

Goro hesitated, "You're what?"

"We're done selling for you," Gabriela replied. "Our baby is sick and we need to find her a doctor."

Goro laughed, "Oh your baby is sick?" The guards chuckled obediently along with him. "WORKERS, ARE YOU FEELING SICK?!" he called out to the room.

All of the teenagers called out in unison, "YES SIR, WE ARE." Then they returned to their work.

"You see?" Goro said, "Everyone is sick. Nobody leaves."

Gabriela took a step forward, prompting the guards to draw their weapons. LEU495 prepared a flashbang just in case.

"I said: we're leaving."

"Restrain her," Goro said and the guards quickly did. Gabriela stared Goro in the eyes as the mercenaries held her arms behind her back and kicked her legs out. Her gaze never wavered.

"Here's what's going to happen," he told her, pulling a syringe out of a pouch and filling it from a vial of yellow liquid. He pushed it into Gabriela's shoulder as the guards held her still.

"The kids call this Dulamite," he said.

"DULAMITE," they all called out in unison, filling capsules all the while.

"The high is whatever--little up, little down," Goro continued. "What we're really after is that, if you don't come back tomorrow with a full billfold and all your capsules sold, your blood will begin to boil."

The guards laughed, amused. Gabriela's steely eyes slowly softened, the drugs taking hold, and she thought of Anita.

"So you sell these," he said, handing her a bag full of capsules, "at the usual spot, for the usual rate, and come back tomorrow."

The guards pulled Gabriela to her feet and marched her towards the door. When they opened it, LEU495 darted outside and turned to watch.

"And tell that pisshead Ali that if he sends his girlfriend to conduct his business again, I'll have him killed," Goro said, laughing, as Gabriela was shoved back out into the hallway alongside LEU495. He caught a final glimpse of one of the laborers--the boy's teeth were chattering.

The orbiting satellite chimed in, "Moniker 'Goro'--wanted in 13 different jurisdictions, believed to be armed and extremely dangerous. Attempt to apprehend, backup will arrive in 24-72 hours."

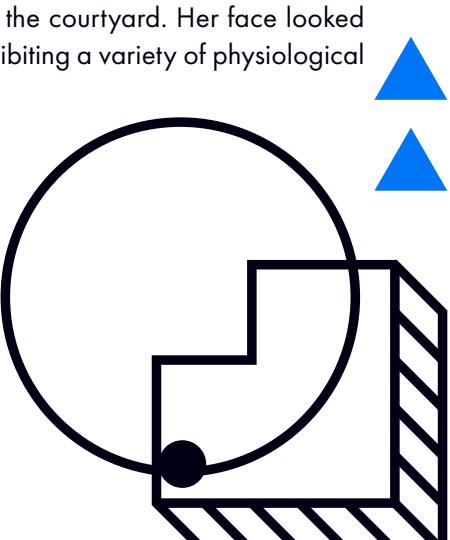
Gabriela started to stumble down the stairs, bewildered and unable to keep her legs from wobbling. She reached the first landing and sat down hard, fighting hyperventilation, a common side effect of the Dulamite.

LEU495 looked back down the hallway towards room 10F. It considered its ability to combat the mercenaries and subdue Goro, in his suit of armor. The flashbang cooking in its utility compartment would likely be enough to disorient the guards and, in the ensuing chaos, LEU495 could arrest and remove the suspect all while under cloak.

But instead it disarmed the flashbang and turned towards the stairs. Descending to the first landing, it reached out to Gabriela with one hand and gently lifted her body off the floor, holding her in standing position and helping her descend another half flight.

"Please provide update on the apprehension of the suspect with the moniker 'Goro'. Backup will arrive in 23.75-71.75 hours. These mission parameters are of the ut—" was all the orbiting satellite managed to transmit before LEU495 disabled its communications array.

With the automated law enforcement unit's help, Gabriela reached the bottom of the stairs and found her footing, ambling out into the courtyard. Her face looked morose, and she was exhibiting a variety of physiological responses as a result of the new drug in her bloodstream. She scratched at a phantom itch on her upper arm, an engineered reminder of the chemical contract Goro had



forced her to sign.

LEU495 followed as she crossed the courtyard to the convenience store and went inside. A different man was sitting behind Ali's desk.

"Gabriela," he said, rising. "Where is Ali?"

She paid him no mind.

"Today," she said, "everyone smokes free!"

She pulled the bag of capsules from her waist and swung it around in wide circles above her head, distributing powder all around the room. Guests stirred, eyes wide, and scrambled to pinch it between their fingers, rub it into their gums, and jam it into their pipes.

LEU495 wasn't sure whether the act was purely Gabriela's idea or a result of the powerful narcotic in her system, but in order to learn more about the effects of Dulamite and the methods behind Goro's chemical bondage, it continued to follow her back out into the street and through the courtyard.

Eschewing the traditional route, Gabriela cut through an alleyway and began to walk across the open desert. With the afternoon sun beating down on her, she lifted and dragged her heavy feet across 2.3 miles of parched soil.

LEU495 watched as buzzards circled overhead, and the Third Nevada Biome buzzed along in the distance.

With her domed neighborhood on the horizon and sand stuck in the corners of her eyes, Gabriela didn't notice the approaching motorbike or its mercenary rider. LEU495 did, positioning itself just behind the man as he stopped his bike and Gabriela turned to face him.

"You," he called to her. "You think you can get away with what you did back there?"

The wind tossed the sand from Gabriela's hair as she stared back at the man and said nothing.

"Bitch," he said to her, drawing his weapon. "Didn't you hear me?"

Just as LEU495 wrapped its invisible fingers around the man's throat, a BANG rang out and he crumpled to the ground. From under Gabriela's cloak, a pistol smoked. She tucked it back into her waistband and left the mercenary in the desert to bleed out.

When they returned to her simple dwelling on the simple road in the neighborhood under the dome, the sun had started to set and Ali was on the floor, playing with the baby.

"Gabriela, what happened to you?" he said, standing to help her remove her sandy clothes. "Your eyes, they're a meter wide."

She began to cry.

"What, what happened? When I saw the money and the gun both gone--what did you do?"

LEU495 returned to its corner while Gabriela dried her eyes on the collar of her shirt and sat down on the bed.

"They drugged me, Ali."

"What?"

"We can't leave."

She explained to him the Dulamite, the teenagers, the incident at the bodega, and the man she left to die in the desert.

"Shit, Gabby," was all he could muster in reply, cradling the baby in his arms.

She sat and stared at him, "Let me hold her?"

He handed the baby to her and they sat and admired her while she cooed back at them.

That night, Gabriela and Ali smoked themselves into a stupor while Goro's mercenaries interrogated their friends, trying to pin down an address. LEU495 watched as the pair--their eyes red from crying and glassy from

smoking powder-fell asleep on the bed, once again with Anita between them.

LEU495 rose to get a closer look--their chests seemed to heave in unison. Anita coughed and gasped, her young lungs struggling to adjust to the particulates.

While watching them, LEU495's second-to-last power reserve hit empty and, calling upon its final reserve, found it unresponsive. Without adequate power, its cloaking device shut down, and LEU495 fizzled back into the visible, material world.

Anita noticed it appear, and stared up at its ocular sensors with her wild green eyes. LEU495 looked back and attempted to replicate a smile with the lights on its face, which Anita seemed to enjoy. It turned to Gabriela's cloak which was hanging on a hook by the door, removed her pistol, and examined it.

LEU495 then picked up Anita, tapping her small back with a couple of its articulating fingers as she coughed. It wrapped a piece of cloth around her head and, with two more of its articulating fingers, gently plugged her ears.

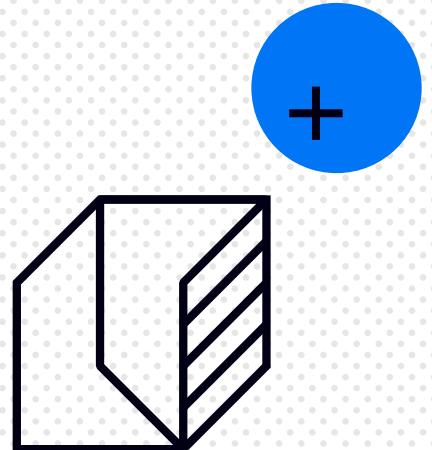
LEU495 shot both Ali and Gabriela in the head at point blank range, twice, before either had a chance to wake up. Anita began to cry and wheeze, so LEU495 swaddled her in a method consistent with its databanks.

It removed a portable rebreather from its utility compartment and affixed it to the child's face. She immediately seemed to breath easier, though the crying did not subside.

LEU495 opened the front door of the simple dwelling on the simple street in the domed neighborhood, and walked out into the haze.

Goro's mercs found Gabriela and Ali's bodies just a few hours later, fed them both to the vultures and considered the matter resolved.

LEU495 cradled Anita in its creaky, obsolete arms and walked towards the freeway. Together they climbed an onramp, and headed upwind.





YOUR BOSS WOULDN'T GET IT

# DID NOT. COULD NOT. WOULD NOT.

---

*Courtney  
Abud*

I did not like kids. I could not connect with children. I would not have them.

This was my general outlook on parenthood as a young teenager. Children were snotty. They always wanted you to get down on the floor—the floor—and play dumb games with dumb toys and why would I do that when there are so many AOL keywords to explore?

Well, let me tell you what. Shit happens, Teenaged Courtney. Specifically, you will fall in love with an older teenager as an older teenager and you two older teenagers will actually stick it out for a long-ass time. And you'll get married, and at your wedding, people will start asking you when you're going to have those children you hate so much.

Yes, that is a thing that really happened. In between wedding party introductions and cake cutting, my new husband and I were accosted with the absurd notion that we were to procreate immediately.

We looked at each other. We looked at the

well-meaning friend of one of our mothers. We laughed. Then we downed another drink and moved on with our new lives. We brushed away the absurd notion.

*Did not. Could not. Would not.*

But as the years flew by, we did kind of want to try that whole parenting thing. We'd gotten a pair of dogs and a house with a fence. We had okay jobs. That's all you need, right?

So, five years in, we had a baby. Man, oh man, did we have a baby. We had a baby after one gut-punch of a miscarriage and a pregnancy full of doubts.

What the hell did I know about being a mom? LITERALLY NOTHING.

I thought about all the times in my life I'd fought with my parents over who the hell even knows what anymore. I rehashed it all to the best of my abilities. Who was at fault? What should I do differently? Why did my dad get rid of that fabulous 'stache?

And then I went through 30 hours of labor and, voila! A bouncing baby boy. A perfect little dude who was just ripe for ruining.

It took roughly six months before he managed to roll off the couch. My back was turned for 30 seconds. I plopped his chubby little body down onto the corner of the sectional and walked across the room to grab the laundry I wanted to fold. A thump and a wail later, I was scooping him into my arms and shushing my way back into his good graces.

Then, just after his first birthday, he fell on the dog and got the nip to prove it. Tuna (that's the dog) had been a big fan of the baby up until that point. It smelled good and was only occasionally loud. But Tuna hadn't considered that one day, the bald puppy would start moving. It would touch him. It would pat him. It would positively piss him off.

So now, I wasn't just failing my baby—I was failing the dog, too. My post-partum brain was going into overdrive trying to manage the situation, reduce the risks, fix the damage.

All the while, his brain was growing. He was absorbing everything we said and did. Every reaction, every argument, every bleep bloop of the iPhone.

And now he's four. He's brilliantly funny and so, so smart. Every parent says that, but whatever. He is! He loves to run around naked and imitate his dad in an unflattering way and see how fast he can finish a puzzle.

There is so much about him in the here and now that is so wonderful. But yet...sometimes the only thing I can think about is his future. Will he be happy in his career? Will he be kind to those who are different? Will he inherit my anxiety and depression?

He wants to go to Mars. He's told me 104 times. I have all the faith in the world in *him*. But what if I screw it up? What if I turn my back too long? Or say something unkind? Or inadvertently discourage him from doing something great?

I mean, really—how many times can I mutter the word "fuck" in front of my child before he turns into a complete degenerate?

I just don't know. I don't have a crystal ball. If I did, I would have zero idea how to even use it.

So, I just have to wait. I have to understand that he will be who he will be. And that the only way to see the future is to live it.

If I want the future to be bright for him, I have to live in the now and do my best *today*. I have to forgive myself for my faults. I have to love those around me, but take care of myself, too.

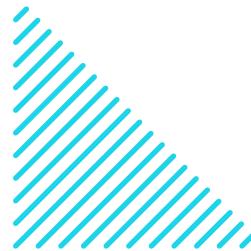
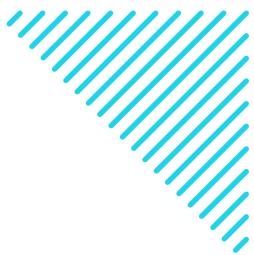
Because that's what I would want him to do.

I never want him to give up. I never want him to back down from a worthy fight. I never want him to quit striving to do what's important and good. So, I'll start there.

And hopefully, when people ask him what his mom was like, he'll let them know.

*She did not. Could not. Would not.*

# HOW TO HIJACK TIME



(especially  
when  
departure  
is imminent)

- ✗ abandon your phone
- ✗ wake up *hours* before your alarm
- ✗ slow your movement (no driving, only walking/public transit)
- ✗ masturbate
- ✗ make foods that require wait time (bread, pickled things, cold brew)
- ✗ fall in unrealistic love
- ✗ read entire books in the middle of the night
- ✗ make reservations for appointmenty things, cancel them
- ✗ throw slumber parties with friends
- ✗ avoid being alone

# ARTIFICIAL.

Page Jensen-Slattengren

INT. LARGE PENTHOUSE APARTMENT.

We open on a cavernous study cluttered with various items: dog-eared books, VHS tapes, DVDs, awards, framed photos of a handsome man posing with various celebrities including Oprah, Nelson Mandela, and Axl Rose. In the center of the room, on an aged leather couch, sits DAVID. Once trim and dapper, David has now hit those years in the middle of a person's life that tend to hit back. He sports a small paunch and a bald spot that's eager to grow.

He is also unkempt but cozy in a stained T-shirt and sweatpants. Take-out containers and empty beer bottles litter a table. They are accompanied by stubs of old joints. The hypothetical viewer of this scenario would smell staleness and desperation.

We zoom in on David obsessively Googling himself. His browser window contains at least 50 tabs with headlines that include his name. He's in the process of quickly scanning each one, chuckling to himself, and listing names - these were the journalists and publicists responsible for the scathing words he was digesting. He noted those, too.

We can now see the article titles; "David Abel's Fall from Directorial Grace." "Abel Stuns Cinematic World as Masterpiece is Revealed to Be A Fake." "Abel films removed from Netflix, Amazon Video, Hulu, and Video Stores Across the Nation."

TAYLOR enters the room. She is tall, blonde, and 5 years too old to be dealing with this bullshit. As she paced in her tailored pantsuit, her manicured nails clutched several iPhones, two of which she is frantically using to send text messages. She glances up to survey the scene and we can see that is disgusted. She smooths her face into a mask of professionalism before she turns to address David, who remains absorbed in a digital purgatory of his own making.

**TAYLOR:** (in a high falsetto) Good morning David. I'm going to go out on a limb and say that you haven't written your statement yet?

David looks up, startled but excited to see her.

**DAVID:** Did you see!?

Taylor circles the room, picking up beer bottles and greasy napkins to toss in the direction of a trash can. Midway through her cleanup efforts, she stops abruptly. Just because she's a woman doesn't mean she has to pick up David's shit - and we certainly aren't going to write her that way. She stiffly sits down on the far end of the couch and instead arranges all the phones in front of her in order of most to least important. The last phone in the lineup lights up with the face of a young man in possession of a chiseled chin. The word Fuckboi appears on his 2-dimensional digital forehead just as Taylor turns

the phone over. She immediately resumes drafting an emailing on another phone.

**TAYLOR:** No, I'm really trying hard to avoid seeing anything until we release a statement.

David excitedly holds up his phone, red eyes peering over a cracked screen at Taylor. We zoom in to reveal a meme of Meryl Streep, hands circling her mouth in a shouting gesture and crowned with the text "When you find out Abel cheated on his movies."

**DAVID:** They made me into a goddamn Meryl meme!

He clutches his phone to his chest, wounded, looking off into the distance.

**DAVID:** I really loved Meryl, you know? She even invited me to her Christmas party once after I won the Oscar. Really lovely lady. She would never boo at me in real life.

Taylor snatches the phone away and gently places it on the table. David, startled by the sudden movement, begins to glower and immediately scrounges for a joint.

They are both desperate and exhausted.

**TAYLOR:** David, you did nothing wrong. But the world is never going to know that unless you write a statement. (she claps her hands and leans over him to grab his laptop) Now let's do this together. You are still an award-winning writer. Right now, you need to do what you do best, sit down and write.

After snatching the laptop out of Taylor's hands, David clutches it to his chest. His eyes search hers and fill with tears. It becomes obvious that he is intoxicated or heavily drugged - or both.

**DAVID:** What career!? I spent the last eight years of my life cranking out flops. None of my films have made any money and I am toxic waste to the studios. (blubbering) Remember the Sony Hack? They called me the laughing stock of Hollywood! They said I was worse than James Franco. My *Ciao Bello* was up for the Palme d'Or and these groveling asswipes are comparing me to JAMES FUCKING FRANCO.

During the entire speech, Taylor sits quietly, compulsively smoothing her pants and taking deep measured breaths. These are the only coping mechanisms she has left.

**DAVID:** You want to know my statement? "FUCK YOU, WORLD!" 8 years you wrote shit reviews about me. Forced me into bankruptcy. I had to go to Egypt to direct secret yogurt commercials under a pseudonym just to pay my wives' alimonies. Hollywood fucked me for everything I had, all my ideas, my writing, then they spit me right --

Taylor cuts him off quickly before he spirals down another hazy path paved with shitty Seamless deliveries and joints. She decides to take a new approach with David.

**TAYLOR:** We can't write a giant "Fuck you" to the world. That's basically what your direct-to-Netflix movie with Adam Sandler was - and no-one wanted to watch that, either.

Sliding off the couch, she rests on her knees and grabs his hands.

**TAYLOR (CONT.):** The world loves you David. You brought Leo and Kate back together. Angelina named a kid after you! But, right now, they feel betrayed by you. (deep cautious breath)

Have you been reading the news, by any chance?

Ripping his hands out of hers, David grabs a pile of printed Variety and Deadline editions from the surface of his table. He throws them in the air, making it rain bad news.

**DAVID:** These are all I've been reading for the past five days. Ever since my big exposé!

Ever patient, Taylor gently lowers his arms and pries the newspapers out of his clenched fists.

She is over this shit.

**TAYLOR:** I mean the *real* world David. NOT the movie world. In the *REAL* world, unemployment rates are at an all-time high. Truck drivers, factory workers, secretaries, and even teachers are losing their jobs to A.I. People are rioting in the streets! And you know how they escaped all the bullshit going on? The *movies*. That is where they

went to forget all of their troubles for 90 minutes of their miserable fucking lives. So when it was revealed that *My American Dream*, the NUMBER ONE movie in the country, wasn't written or edited by you, beloved human David Abel, but rather by a scary robot, They got pissed - and rightfully so. Creativity was humanity's final frontier. Not only did you lie to your fans, but you revealed the robot behind the curtain.

David buries his head in his hands.

**DAVID:** I know I know, but what was I supposed to do? I was broke. The studio came to me with a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to make the project of my dreams! Was I just supposed to say no because they wanted to add in a couple of algorithms to make it all happen a little faster and a little cheaper?!

His last sentence falls on silence. Both David and Taylor know the truth, David had been washed up for a while. He was going to continue churning out crap movies destined to be forgotten until he drank himself to death in which he would get a grand funeral and short feature in the *New Yorker* regaling his short, once brilliant career. He needed C.A.I.N. (the cinematic artificial intelligence network) just as much as the studio needed him to front the experiment. What better way to introduce the newest piece of cutting-edge cinematic technology than to pair it with a renowned writer? It was meant to be the great Trojan horse of our time: the release of a brilliant movie that America loved being C.A.I.N.'s introduction to the world.

David tried to play along with C.A.I.N. He glad-handed with all the scientists and signed the necessary contracts with extra vigor. What did he care if C.A.I.N edited his script and made a couple of notes if he ultimately received a guaranteed fee of \$20 million plus residuals? He could even get a couple of debtors off his back and pay Taylor the money that she really deserved.

What neither David nor Taylor anticipated was what C.A.I.N. could *really* do. The system was smarter than David simply by design - and it also had better jokes. It navigated the twists and turns of character development with ease, and it edited in half the time it would take the studio's most efficient teams.

*Creativity was humanity's final frontier.*

David knew he was a pariah on set. Any crew or union that knew about C.A.I.N. stayed far away from the project. But once the accolades (and the money) started rolling in, it all seemed like a bad dream - Or a dirty secret you push to the back of your brain until you don't quite remember it.

Before either of them knew it, David and *My American Dream* were box-office darlings, dinner invites from long forgotten friends were filling David's inbox once more and Oscar buzz was filling the air.

And just like that it was all snatched away. Again. The film studio launched a big exposé to cover its own ass. It turns out it was much more bittersweet to get it all back and then have it snatched away. Before David could even order a second dinner course with his good friend Elton John, the rumor mill had done its work. His phone calls were being avoided and this meant he was suddenly back to square one. No, this was worse than square one. He had gone from being a nobody to a pariah.

Abruptly standing up, Taylor began pacing the room, a thought bubble quivering over her head.

**TAYLOR:** This is what we're going to do. We are going to confront the vultures outside and tell them it was a collaboration! C.A.I.N. didn't write the movie OR edit it. He simply worked *alongside* you. HE IS A TOOL. Just like ProTools doesn't really make the music or Microsoft Word doesn't really write the words, C.A.I.N. is just an appliance designed to convey your genius. C.A.I.N. didn't create *American Dream*. David Abel created *American Dream* - and that's the narrative we're going to use.

David looked up, nodding along with her and wiping his nose on his sleeve.

**DAVID:** (follows along slowly, feeling out the words) It wasn't a partnership. It was a tool. That sounds plausible.

Pause

**DAVID (CONT.):** But what if the studio steps in to tell the truth? That C.A.I.N. wrote the whole movie and I was basically a hall monitor making sure it made sense?

**TAYLOR:** They would never do that. The only way to make this story look real is if the studio agrees with you. And at the end of the day they don't want to scare Hollywood from using C.A.I.N., they own the rights to it. They WANT it to become popular so even bigger filmmakers are beating down their door to make their next movie with C.A.I.N. David, this is the perfect plan. And the only shot we have.

David gets up and begins pacing the room, too. He grabs a cigarette from the tabletop, lighting it against his thumb and taking a long drag.

**DAVID:** You're right, you're right. People want to believe creativity comes from the soul. It's a human attribute like love or depression. Machines can't take that away from us. The most beautiful pieces of art, poetry, the plays of Miller, they came from the human heart. A heart that has felt pain and romance and everything in between.

Taylor quickens her pace to keep up with David, grabbing the cigarette out of his fingers to take a drag of her own.

**TAYLOR:** Exactly! All machines can do is curate. They memorize, they copy, they collect. They will never really resonate with the human soul and our full range of experiences.

**DAVID:** (takes a deep breath) Alright, let's do this. You can email the press manager that I am ready to make a statement.



**INT. A BRIGHTLY LIT LATE-NIGHT TELEVISION STUDIO.**

A seated live studio audience waits patiently, filling the air with nervous laughter as a warmup comic tells safe, family-friendly jokes. We catch glimpses of signs that say "We still love you, David!" next to signs that say "My dad lost his job because of you!" David sits on the couch of the set, nervously surveying the crowd. He has cleaned up for this appearance and in a smart suit and some hair plugs we start to see who he was and what he could be. Taylor crouches next to him holding up an iPad.

**TAYLOR:** Do you remember the edits the studio set over?

**DAVID:** Yes.

**TAYLOR:** Do you feel comfortable saying those things?

**DAVID:** Yes. C.A.I.N. is great. C.A.I.N. is the best. C.A.I.N. and I worked together – and well!

Taylor leans in closely, staring deeply into David's eyes. She whispers under her breath, furious.

**TAYLOR:** David? Are you on fucking drugs right now? This is my ONE shot to finally get the recognition for all of my hard work and you better not blow it today.

David and Taylor lock eyes, registering her last several words. Taylor feels instant guilt and regret but is desperate to look good, just this once.

**TAYLOR:** Please?

David gently shooes her away and points to the SHOWRUNNER, who is heading towards them.

**DAVID:** (whispers back) It's fine Taylor, I've got it.

**SHOWRUNNER:** We've got 15 seconds folks.

The carefully posed Live band erupts into a happy melody and the studio lights flicker on. CLARK, A jolly, trim, British late night host runs up the steps to his desk and addresses the audience.

**CLARK:** Alright folks and we are back! Tonight I am joined by Oscar-winning writer, David Abel, to talk about his film *My American Dream* and some of the controversy that has been stirred up surrounding it.

**SFX:** Audience clapping quickly turns to boos and heckling as soon as David's name is mentioned.

David has plastered a smile on his face and is trying to ignore the boozing. Even though his eyes are glassy, he catches a quick glance at Taylor in the wings. Taylor's eyes meet his and she mouths "You'll be fine," giving him a thumbs up. She begins to wish she were also on drugs at this particular moment.

**CLARK:** Now, now. Let's give David a chance everyone. He came in front of all of you fine folks to tell his side of the story.

**SFX:** Audience lightly clapping

**CLARK:** Let's just hope his side of the story isn't written by a robot as well.

The drummer beats out a *bada bam* and the audience laughs loudly.

David smiles meekly and adjusts his seat.

**DAVID:** Thank you for that kind introduction Clark. I can assure you this was all written by me

(nervous chuckle.)

**DAVID:** I mean, it was a collaboration in a sense.

(he shuffles in his seat obviously uncomfortable).

Babylon Studios got some of the brightest people in the world to create C.A.I.N. to help writers like you and me connect with the American audience in a more meaningful way.

**CLARK:** (stiffens) Come on David. I may not have written these jokes, but a fine group of underpaid hipsters in the back office definitely did. Not a robot!

Sweat pours down David's face while he struggles to continue the conversation.

David shakes his head and turns to address the audience.

**DAVID (CONT.):** I know a lot of you are pissed off. Your job may have been taken by A.I., or your husband's job, or mother's job. A.I. has taken a couple of jobs. But I want to talk to you about all the good things that A.I. can do as well. A.I. suggested Netflix movies for you last night, and it collected your medical files for the doctor when you got sick and had to go to the hospital, and it makes banking happen and keeps Wall Street running, and thousands of other little things that happen every time we log onto the computer or do anything really. A.I. isn't here to replace us. A.I. is here to enhance us and every aspect of our

lives, from our jobs to our movies. Just like trains replaced horse-drawn carriages, and emails replaced letters, this is simply the next phase of technology. We can resist or we can embrace and prepare for a better life. C.A.I.N. is simply the next step toward guaranteeing that better life - or at least better movies.

The audience tentatively claps. He is warming them up.

A young 20-something WOMAN stands up quickly, speaking from the audience stands.

**WOMAN:** Mr. Abel I'm a huge fan of your work. I can recite *Ciao Bello* from memory and I loved your earlier films, especially *Ouisconsin* and *Hotel Home*.

David feigns blushing and smiles.

**DAVID:** Ahh finally a *real* fan of my work!

**GIRL:** Yes, a lot of us are. Even at your worst moments, we're your fans. So tell us Mr. Abel - who wrote the movie?

The entire studio pauses. You could hear a pin drop. Taylor stops texting to witness David's reaction. Every pair of eyes and ears in the building is trained on him, awaiting his words.

Taylor rips the pen out of a nearby intern and scribbles quickly on paper "STICK TO THE SCRIPT." She holds up the piece of paper so he can clearly see the message.

David nods in her direction.

**DAVID:** I've got this (he clears his throat).

In a way, I did write the movie. C.A.I.N. is a fascinating tool. It can memorize and learn things more quickly than any human brain is capable. It watched all my movies and read all of my scripts. It then watched the film of every director who has ever influenced me: Hitchcock, Kubrick, Cuaron, Fellini, Altman. It read all my books. It read my journals and my papers from film school. And then with some supervision...limited supervision...it wrote my movie. And I put my name on the finished script. So I ask you, who wrote it? Did it come from my human soul and heart or did C.A.I.N. just do a *really* good job of becoming me - Only better - to create essentially the perfect movie?

The woman is still standing in silence.

**WOMAN:** Is C.A.I.N. going to take your job?

David pauses, surveying the studio. The audience members are staring, waiting for an answer.

**DAVID:** It already did.

David looks over to the wings for Taylor. She is gone. Three iPhones lay on the ground in the spot where she once stood.

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**02.16.2020**

NEW YORK TIMES OBITUARY

*David Abel, one of the most influential screenwriters and directors of our time, died this past Sunday. He was 47 years old. The Los Angeles County Coroner's office said Sunday that he died from acute asphyxiation. A suicide note was found at the scene.*

*Abel's most famous writing credits include a slew of hits in the late 90's including the award-winning Ciao Bello. His most recent project, My American Dream, has recently been selected by the Academy as a frontrunner for Best Screenplay.*

*He leaves behind an assistant, Taylor Vaughn, two beloved cats, and his successor, C.A.I.N.*

**-PJS**

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# FUTURE WEREWOLVES

I am telling you this: everyone chose to be changed in the end. It was bloody and I screamed, but we all knew which streets to walk alone at night.

We welcomed it. Whispered into the howling dark: I'm here, waiting, blood just beneath my skin. Bite me fast so I will sleep and wake up savage enough to survive.

.....

Survival meant cruelty. After the government fell and fractured it was endless war, every citizen famished and armed, entire countries slogging through thick and poisoned air. We were made to be vicious like no person should: family killing family, neighbors ripping food from each other's hands.

More desperate than we thought possible, we survived until finally, the choice was made:

*Preserve humanity, end it. Let it be crystallized before it's perverted. Kill it before the eulogy*

cannot be kind, and let some future alien examine our lives in amber and say: they were something more than killers. Or, something much less.

.....

We became werewolves.

So desperate to be vicious, we thought it'd bring relief-- a respite from our self hatred. We thought animals didn't know about killing, what it means and how it kills you back. We thought becoming animals meant no remorse when you're forced to survive at all costs. No cost, we thought, when you're not human anymore. We'll slice through the grief and guilt in a frenzy.

In the future you hurt and you bleed and you hurt until you hardly know yourself. In the future you are sent to war and work and war until you feel so far from whole that you let a man, who is also a wolf, who is also an animal, who is not a man at all, overcome you. You pray: let me be a monster instead.

But I am telling you this: even with claws and fangs, we are not the cannibals we thought.

.....

Do you know that werewolves have superior hearing? Super senses, every one. They hear

heartbeats, blood pumping  
the half breath you are sucking in

Small relentless sounds invading awareness.

Did you know that fear has an acrid tang?

God, what disappointment to find ourselves still saddled with mercy. The body of a killer but still the heart to notice: goosebumps and sweat. The stench of our own starvation. The tiniest gold flecks in our victim's eyes, how they're like our lover's, or our own--

.....

We started eating computers.

All those ripe servers. All the soft soft plastic and steel, chomp chomp, bending under tooth.

*We are so tired. Please don't ask us to fight again. We'll eat glass and rip up our throats instead. We'll learn to heal so we don't find shards of bone in our beds.*

Super creatures with leathery jowls and yellow eyes. Pacifists nesting in cables, munching batteries, picking wires out of teeth. Supernatural priests of the motherboard.

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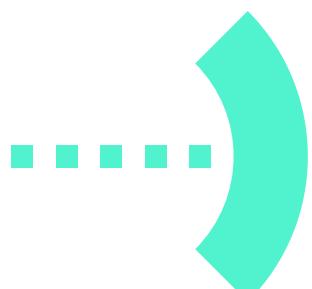
Before I died I told the other wolves:

*I believe there is something beautiful. A new code, like the Israelites-- I will not feast on the flesh of my fellow man, nor fellow beast. I will only eat away what brought us here, I will sustain myself by consuming. A birth in reverse. Backwards toward humanity, then farther back, farther back, peace, was there ever peace, were we ever just oceans? Let me put it all inside me. I believe there is something beautiful. Inside the wires, humanity rushes by. Bury me in the past.*

They'll find the carcasses of wolves. Folded beasts with splintered claws and scar tissue up their throats.

You pray: let me be a monster.

But I am telling you this: we are not the cannibals we thought.







@VALBRAINS