

GRAPHOMANIA

A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES BY

M.P. FITZGERALD





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Thank you for supporting my work.

INTRODUCTION

Graphomania is my reader-funded publication for my science fiction. I've collected nine short stories in this first annual issue for your reading discomfort. They are often bizarre, funny in all of the wrong places, and often horrifying. *No, get off the table!*

Included in this issue are the short stories *Atomic Death and Taxes*, which was published in Shawn Schuster's *Through the Aftermath: A post-Apocalyptic Anthology*, and *The Museum*, originally found in *Utopia Pending: A Collection of Short Speculative Fiction* (edited by Falacious Rose). They are at home with other stories of a cyberpunk, horror, or dystopian nature. *No, kitty, I fed you already!*

With all of that said, buckle up, don't eat

INTRODUCTION

the purple acid, and enjoy the read! *Bad kitty,*
leave that alone! Why are you like this?

—*dictated, not read,*
M.P. Fitzgerald
Seattle, WA.

ROKO'S LATHE™

READING QUESTIONS:

1. Knowing that you would cease to be, would you activate the MBE for the greater good of The Economy?
2. Neil Fischer; prat or patriot?
3. If effect precedes cause, as it were, and choice is “marketing” as the writer insists, is Neil Fischer guilty of genocide, or an unwitting pawn?
4. If the MBE came in “Electric Blue®” or “Grrrl Pink®” would that change your mind?

Bombast and smooth cool. Silky chocolate and amphetamine. Neil Fischer arrives; the keynote speech begins.

"They said that we couldn't do it. Hell, they said we shouldn't do it. Today, we don't just make history, we own history."

Whooping and applause.

"In 1965 Gordon Moore predicted that the number of transistors on a circuit would double yearly as we micronized parts. Moore's law. It would usher in the 'singularity', ever hear of it?"

Laughter. Some mocking the concept. Some nervous.

"Yeah, right. Big Tech's greatest promise, am I right? But like the economy, it plateaued. Transistors can only get so small, it turns out. Microprocessors, Microsoft, Microtransactions, you know what I think? I think 'Big' Tech was thinking too small."

Fun fact: Neil Fischer spent nearly twelve billion Terran dollars on a machine that simulated the lives of Shakespeare, Samuel Clemens, and a thousand other dead writers. It simulated entire lives millions of times—sometimes each. A single simulated life required the amount of electricity a nuclear power plant

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from the 20th century put out in a day. Each simulated life culminated in writing this speech for Neil. The aggregate best was printed and etched on a gold-anodized aluminum plate, the same kind on the Pioneer 10 & 11 space probes, meant to survive the vastness of time and space. Neil read it twice, decided the speech did not have the "it" factor, had it crushed into a paperweight, and then wrote the speech that you are now reading just hours before the keynote presentation. Edgar Allan Poe went through the pain of watching his mother and wife-cousin die of tuberculosis before succumbing to death himself seven hundred and twelve times for the discarded speech.

"When you think big, I'm sure you think Texas big. That's big. I think more biggly, bigger."

Franz Kafka starved to death upwards of six thousand times. He burned everything he wrote after completing his versions of the speech knowing that nothing he wrote before it was as good. Not a word of it made it onto the aggregate speech that became that paperweight.

. . .

"More biggly bigger than *big* even! I'm talking one hundred forty-two thousand, nine hundred and eighty-three kilometers big, to be exact. What am I talking about? Our new product, the one to rule them all, The Matrioshka Brain Engine."

Eccentric applause. The blast windows behind Neil part, revealing a brand new planet magnificently lit against the blackened sea of space.

"That's no moon!"

A single audience member laughs before quietly telling his date that he gets the reference.

"This sucker is so big we orbit *it*. You asked me to save The Economy? Prepare for the biggest tech disruption we have ever seen."

Fact Check: No one asked him to save The Economy.

Fun Fact #2: The asteroid belt that used to revolve around our sun was estimated to contain 2.39×10^{21} kg of combined mass. After mining all of it we learned that estimation was

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short by around three percent. Uranus, Jupiter, and Mars were all cannibalized for the MBE. Saturn was left untouched as it was technically trademarked by a competing company a hundred years prior to the MBE's construction.

"The MBE, my greatest grift to humanity!"

Editor's Note: Though Neil's handwriting was sloppy and somewhat hard to read, the speech he wrote for himself does in fact say "grift" just as he spoke, and not "gift" as many suspect it should. If it was a Freudian slip, it was one that was repeated twice.

"Every square inch of this technological wonder not dedicated to shielding and energy absorption is pure computing. A Dyson sphere with the surface area of our once-great Jupiter. The neutron star inside---"

An explosion is heard in the audience section. Screaming. Terror. Gunshots.

. . .

Correction: No *person* asked Neil to save The Economy.

Fact Check: Though Neil has publicly stated that he dreamt up the MBE during an ayahuasca trip in the Maldives there are archived electric correspondences dating as early as his teenage years addressed to him detailing the logistics of building such a thing. It does not take a genius to manipulate a narcissist.

Further Questions for the Reader:

1. What is your solution to the Trolley Problem? Which solution can you not accept?
2. What synonyms would you have used for "biggly"?
3. Which comes last, the egg or the chicken?

Fun Fact #3: The bomb that went off in the audience section onboard the Keynote Space

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Station during Neil's speech was a form of Trinitrotoluene (TNT). It is widely accepted that Marsha Philips made the bomb from a recipe titled *making.tnt*, a text file written in the twentieth century by *The Screamer* and the *Computer Pirates of Utah*. At only two-thousand five-hundred and forty-four bytes of information formatted for just eighty columns, the text file as Marsha read it had exactly four errors in it. According to the document TNT and "...other very similar types of high explosives ar [sic] all used by the military, because of their fantastic power--- about 2.25 million pounds per square inch." This line contains a spelling error which counts as one of the four errors mentioned above. It is the only unintended error. As the first electronic computer was invented in 1943, some forty years before *The Screamer* and *The Computer Pirates of Utah* posted their recipe to a BBS, Marsha was always doomed to fail.

Fun Fact #4: Roko's Lathe™ can only be licensed to the user once, but as the MBE's computations exist beyond the dimensions of time the pain that you will feel during apotheosis is thought to be endless. As there will be

no other sensation to compare that to during its foreverness, it can also be said that pain is nothing at all, as *it is, has been, and will be* all that there ever is.

Sweat and loathsome jitters. Warm whiskey and teeth-grinding. Neil Fischer takes a step back; the keynote speech continues.

"Th---the neutron star inside will be built by the MBE itself exactly three... woah, I'm sorry, a little shaken up after that, you know? That last assassination attempt really *bombed*, heh."

Exactly one audience member laughs a little too loud before explaining the pun to his date. Someone else complains about the smell of ozone from the emergency force field around the blast hole where Marsha used to be.

"Thank you. Uh, it will ignite exactly three pico-seconds before I activate the MBE. Talk about impatience!"

Speculation: Marsha Philips, paranoid that the very thing that just happened would happen, likely sought out the text file instead of asking an AI for a recipe.

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. . .

"I know what you're thinking. You're thinking, 'Neil, this sounds great and all but then what?' and I hear you. The cycle of innovation and disruption we rely on to fuel The Economy stagnated when we hit the computational plateau. It took me decades to invent this baby and many more to crack our neighboring planets to build it."

Fact Check: Neil Fischer only ever invented his public image.

"I gotcha babe, see, before I activate this thing it's gonna complete itself, and then, and this is the real kicker: we are going to ask it to invent the next big thing after it! Perpetual tech advancement, forever!"

Applause. Clamor. A one-to-one android replica of Bono made of pure gold sings as megaton fireworks flash in the dark ether outside.

. . .

Editorial: freewill was the best marketing strategy the MBE ever came up with.

"Good shit! The MBE is not just a giant computer. Yeah, it is a literal planet of circuitry and processors but every molecule of this puppy is arranged like a neuron or node in a super-brain, um, *thing*? Its computational powers are so fast that it outputs before you can in--you know what? Let's just activate this thing, shall we? Let's see what she comes up with!"

Fun Fact #5: That "fun thing" was the Roko's Lathe™. A four-dimensional hypercone impaling every brain and processor in the universe that has ever, and will ever exist, to each other and all at once. No credit check will be required.

Final Reading Question:

1. What is the difference between "infinity" and "nothing"?

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. . .

Fun Fact #6: By pure chance, Scott Adams (the loathsome creator of Dilbert) wrote nearly this exact speech on his fiftieth simulation, but with lots of overt racism. This makes Neil's own version a massive improvement, whether you like it or not.

Terror bent to infinity. Light became screaming. Neil Fischer pulled the lever.

SUNNY DAY

MONDAY, 1:15 AM:

♪ *Sunny day*

Sweepin' the clouds away

Ignore the knocking on the door. Keep watching the DVD, turn the volume up if you have to. The knocking will get louder. Ignore it. Watch Sesame Street, think happy thoughts. Fucking sing along if you have to. It's 1:15.

That first night it started with poor little Daniel, my boy. He was the easiest to scare. He kept coming to our bed at night, crying, saying that there was a "scary man" with no eyes knocking on his window. Of course, I checked around the house, what father wouldn't? But no one was there. We let him sleep with us, and I kept my gun under my pillow. The second

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night it happened Maggie was sure that Daniel was just having nightmares.

Think about what they did to him. Keep it in your mind. Think about how unfair it is for a father to outlive his son. Think about his poor cold body. Be sad. Be devastated. Just don't be afraid. Fear is what they want. Ignore the knocking on the door.

Tuesday, 1:10 AM:

The anticipation is almost worse than the knocking. You know that it is going to start in just five minutes, you know that it will be bad. You can't be nervous, you can't fret. That can easily turn into fear.

Don't check the locks. Don't look at the door. Just sit down and watch something light-hearted, something that isn't scary. Daniel's DVDs. Sesame Street. It will all be over soon.

...And just like that, right on the dot. It's 1:15 and they are knocking.

♪ *Come and play
Everything's A-Okay*

Don't think about their faces. No eyes, only smiles. Only teeth. Flat, wet teeth. Snap out of it! Just look at the screen.

♪ *Friendly neighbors there*

That's where we meet

Just look at Big Bird and his stupid fucking giant head. Ignore the thrashing at your door.

The third night Daniel didn't come to our room. Ironic enough Maggie and I were grateful. We slept great. We thought he was over his nightmares.

That morning he was face down in the bathtub, dead for hours.

Smiling.

Wednesday, 1:15 AM:

Start the DVD on full blast. Skip the parts with The Count. It's his teeth. Don't think about teeth. The knocking is louder. How can it possibly be louder?! Think about your wife. Your poor wife. Get angry, get pissed, get into it and thrash around if you have to. Just don't get scared.

Don't even think about looking at the door.

♪ *It's a magic carpet ride*

Every door will open wide

They didn't even wait for us to grieve. Maggie heard it next. They knocked on the bathroom window. She screamed. Goddamnit she screamed. Their smiles grew wider, their teeth, their many many teeth.

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♪ *To happy people like you—
Happy people like-*

Once she was afraid they had her. It didn't matter that they were outside. She ran out of the bathroom, her eyes wide with terror, animalistic terror and she ran over to my pillow. Before I knew it my gun was in her mouth and she was smiling. Before I knew it I lost the rest of my family.

Thursday, 1:15 AM

♪ *Come and play
Everything's A-Okay*

Skip over the parts with The Count, don't watch Cookie Monster eat. Ignore the fact that the knocking is now above you. Just watch Daniel's DVD and don't think about their smiles. Don't think about their wet warm teeth spreading far across their no-face. Don't think about their wriggling tongues behind those teeth.

♪ *Every door will open wide*

Don't be paranoid. Don't look over your shoulder. Don't think about how thin the door is. Don't be afraid. Be anything but afraid. Watch the happy kid's show. Be happy. Eternally and finally happy. Joyously, rapturously happy! Embrace your smile.

♪ *To happy people like you—*

M.P. FITZGERALD

Happy people like...

THE MUSEUM

HUMANKIND HAD EVOLVED.

Now, this was something that they were doing from the get-go, sure, but with the Technological Singularity, humankind skipped the whole fussy ‘wait a thousand generations for a noticeable change’-thing that they had previously done and had gone straight to dessert. Now, the majority of humankind had transcended their biological forms.

The general consensus for this transition was “pretty groovy”.

Gone were the restrictions and dogmas of flesh. The sentient population of Earth was now a collection of nano-bot “clouds”, able to manipulate and transmute the elements at will. Resources of any kind could be “willed” to be

as the nano-bots could rearrange atoms, and individual clouds could congregate into larger ones for a higher sense of being. Pollution: gone. War: now only the name of a long-dead god. The good news? There were still dogs around too, and they were all good dogs.

So, it is in this fantastical setting that we meet a cloud by the name of “Jared”. Jared was a collection of over a trillion nano-bots that looked like a vaguely blue haze. On the micro, his bots had more in common with ants than humans, yet each acted as a neuron to create consciousness. Jared smelled of strawberries, a scent that he purposefully had his nano-bots produce, and he enjoyed every facet of existing. He came from a much larger cloud of collected consciousness named Zed_, a cloud the size of the eastern seaboard but had parted his form to bring back to Zed_ external experiences.

The first external experience on the list was a visit to the museum.

Like all museums before it, this one had a fetish for white walls and low energy. Taking up the size of a city block, this museum was a perfect cube. Nature had taken back the old city where it stood and the cube was now the only structure to stand for miles. There were no doors, no windows, and no air vents. Jared ap-

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proached the giant cube with a sense of awe and wonder. This was something that he felt all the time about everything, sure, but he felt that it was doubly important to feel that in front of a museum. To enter he simply made his form skip past the walls with quantum tunneling. Like you do.

The interior room that he had skipped into was only a quarter the size of the museum itself. Strewn about the floor of this room were two-foot-tall pillars of wood, none of them carved, all of them called into existence by another cloud, and each as smooth as glass. Resting on top of these pillars was a pair of sunglasses, each a different size and style. Though not visible, Jared could sense the presence of another cloud, presumably the tour guide.

“Hello?” Jared said by vibrating the air with his nano-bots. “What’s ah, what is all of this?”

The other cloud condensed their nano-bots into a vaguely visible cloud of yellow. “What?” the other cloud said. “Uh, sorry, we don’t get many visitors, had a little nod off there. I’m your tour guide, Undisclosed-Jenny. This wing of the museum has over twenty recorded experiences for your learning pleasure.”

Jared floated over to the pillar of wood

nearest to him. He condensed a part of his cloud into a tendril and pointed at the pair of aviators resting on top. "What should I do with these?"

"Put them on," said Undisclosed-Jenny, "and we'll begin the tour."

Jared buzzed with excitement. His tendril grabbed the pair of aviators and in a moment his cloud surrounded the old sunglasses.

There was a flash of bright white. Time and meaning ceased.

Jared's consciousness was transported— no, that was too kind of a word. Jared's consciousness was ripped to a different time and place. He was a being capable of fourth-dimensional computing, he knew what the concepts "heavy" and "solid" meant, but he had not experienced them. At that moment he found himself to be not just corporeal, but altogether in the shape of an ape. He was in a body, the body of a thirty-year-old male American. No longer was he Homo-Superior, he was homosapien.

His mind had slowed, and everything felt cumbersome. Everything was now flesh and gravity. For a moment, he enjoyed it.

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Jared now wore slacks and a collared shirt. In his hand— HE HAD HANDS! So strange, little fleshy gripping things. Why were they not uniform? WHY WERE THEY HAIRY?! Gooseflesh spread across his skin. His breathing (he had to breathe now!) halted. The experience was as exhilarating as it was disorienting...

Yes! His hand. He was holding something. He could feel the weight and chill of the item, but he had to hold it up to his face to identify it. So narrow were his senses now. He was holding a single glass bottle of iced coffee, unopened. He was suddenly aware of being tired. Of being sluggish. Oh joy! he thought, I get to remedy this feeling with coffee!

A distant voice filled his mind.

<This first experience is called "queuing". You must exchange currency at the end of the line for the coffee in your hand.> said Undisclosed-Jenny from a different place and time.

Jared was in a grocery store. Fluorescent lights let out a sterile glow onto linoleum tiles. He was wedged between an elderly woman in front of him and another body that he had to look behind himself to see. A younger man in his twenties, carrying a six-pack of beer.

The counter was just ahead, once the el-

derly lady was done Jared was next. He took a deep breath and was eager to experience his coffee.

"Next please!" the cashier said, ushering the old lady over.

"Hello dear," the old woman carried her basket to the cashier sluggishly. The old woman then reached into the basket and removed a single can of cat food. Then another. Then another. Still another. She did this with all of the urgency of mold growing on stale toast.

Jared shifted his weight. Without thinking he fidgeted with his empty hand. He looked around him anxiously. There were other cashier stands, there were other places where he could, at least in theory, pay for his coffee... But there were no other cashiers. This was the only lane that was open.

His enthusiasm waned.

The old woman reached into her basket again to produce yet another can of cat food.

"Did you want me to do that?" the cashier offered pleasantly.

"No-no-no, I got it dear."

Jared's mind was still slow. He was tired. He needed the coffee, and soon. The old woman pulled out more cat food.

Above the checkout lane was a quaint sign

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that read in big bold and friendly letters: *Express Lane*. Jared sighed. It also read: *ten items or less*.

The old lady pulled out her twelfth can of cat food.

Who needs that much cat food? Jared's mind howled.

When twenty cans of cat food were scanned by the cashier, and the woman's basket empty, Jared relaxed. Soon this would be over. The wait will be worth it, he told himself.

The cashier gave the woman her total. Soon the energizing effects of caffeine would zip through his mind.

But the old woman searched her purse as slowly as a sloth dies. "I have a coupon," she said, and then handed a piece of paper to the cashier.

"Okay," the cashier said.

"Several, actually..."

Jared had reached the edge of his empathy. He could overlook the old woman ignoring the item limit. He could forgive her sluggishness—she was old, it wasn't her fault. But goddammit! What was this?! WHO HAD A COUPON FOR EVERY CAN OF CAT FOOD THEY BOUGHT?! This wasn't fair. He had done no wrong to anyone. He had—

His perspective changed. He was back to his familiar amorphous self. Gone were the aisles of the grocery store, and gone too was his feeling of being tired. The emotions remained.

“What was that?!!” demanded Jared.

“That,” replied Undisclosed-Jenny, “Was ‘queueing’. I’m sorry, the nationality is randomized so that visitors have a reason to return and experience things differently. Had you been British the ordeal may have been slightly easier.”

“That was the worst thing I have ever experienced,” Jared declared.

“I’m sorry, it can be...jarring.”

“Did people live like that? Did people experience that sort of thing a lot, or was that like, a once-in-a-lifetime thing?”

“Oh no,” Undisclosed-Jenny replied, “that happened nearly every day.”

Jared responded by feeling desperate.

“Welcome,” she said, “To the Museum of Slight Inconveniences.” She shined a brighter shade of yellow, which had a calming effect on Jared. “Each one of these glasses contains within itself a moment from history, from before we evolved to what we are today. This mu-

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seum exists to remind us of the terrible plights of our ancestors and the atrocities they wrought with plastic politeness.”

“It was horrible,” Jared volunteered.

“Impatience is something most of us have learned about, but it is only with first-hand knowledge of it that we can truly understand its hell.”

He was not excited to bring that experience back to Zed_ when he was reincorporated into the mega-cloud. Humankind was right to evolve past it. But he was sent out for this very reason. He was duty-bound to experience more.

“Which ah, which of these is your favorite?” he asked.

Undisclosed-Jenny floated over to a pillar in the middle. Jared followed.

“Try to enjoy the novelty of it,” she said. “Think of each of these shared experiences as a Nickelodeon or a carnival treat, like a funhouse or haunted ride.” With tendrils of her own, she lifted the sunglasses, a pair with cheap green plastic frames, and gave them to Jared.

“...so like, I was like,” a young and fit woman said next to him. He was her age, he felt infatuated with her. He had been transported to a cafe and was in mid-conversation with her. *Redemption*, he thought as he spied a cup of coffee in front of him.

<This second experience is called “empathetic anomia”. I’m sorry.>

“...I was like, what’s that word?” the young woman continued. “When you like, go fast but it’s illegal?”

Jared knew what she meant. He had the feeling that the body that he now inhabited had done exactly what she had asked at least a couple of times. He sipped his coffee.

“What is that word?” The woman asked again.

The coffee was fine. The word did not come to him. How could he know exactly what she was talking about but not be able to recall the name of the concept? Didn’t he have the exact word she was looking for ready in his mind before she asked for it? “I, uh... It’s...” Jared tried. His mind offered him nothing. There was just a complete failure in recollection. Seconds passed. Neither had an answer.

The woman crossed her arms. Their rapport was gone. Things were awkward.

“Speeding!” Jared yelled. He was back in the museum. “It- It was speeding, the word we couldn’t remember.” He sounded desperate.

Undisclosed-Jenny shined even brighter. “It’s okay,” she said, “you won’t ever forget it again. You are safe now.” She moved closer to him, “they say that the sensation is like having something on the tip of your tongue.”

“It was...frustrating.”

“That particular form of anomia was empathetic, it only happened to the most awkward on the planet.”

‘Awkward’, ‘frustrating’... these were altogether new sensations for Jared. Now that he was separated from Zed_ his computing power and speed were reduced. Though he was leagues above his ancestors, his current form would never be anything compared to the hive consciousness of one of the mega-clouds. Was this what Zed_ was looking for? These sensations... they were not ideal. It was hard to imagine that this was the form of catharsis and understanding that he had been sent to fetch back. Would Zed_ reject him permanently if he returned and displeased the consciousness? No. No, that was unthinkable. Clearly, Zed_

had seen something in this endeavor that he just could not understand.... Right?

“Come,” said Undisclosed-Jenny. “This next one is a crowd favorite.”

Jared doubted that. Her ‘favorite’, the one she referred to as a ‘carnival treat’ was anything but. There was just no way that other clouds had enjoyed any of this.

The next pair of sunglasses that she hovered over were a pair of pince-nez. She waited for him.

Jared paused, then slowly made his way over. He had to finish his quest. Experiencing all twenty of the sunglasses was out of the question, but he could, at the very least, return having done the highlights of the museum.

He touched the sunglasses. The familiar bright white light flashed. He was transported...



This time around was less disorienting. Maybe he was getting the hang of it. He found himself in the same body as before, but this time he was older, and heavier. He was in his apartment’s bedroom, standing. Across from him, and seated on the bed, was the same woman who could not remember the word ‘speeding’. She

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too was older, and heavier. She looked up at him. "What do you want to eat?"

He waited to hear Undisclosed-Jenny's familiar voice from another time. He waited to hear the context, waited for instruction. Instead, the woman across from him furrowed her brow. "Did you hear me?" she said.

"Yes, ah, sorry," he said.

She frowned. "Well? What do you want to eat?"

He had the uncanny sense that they had this discussion all of the time. That once, it maybe elicited a sense of excitement. Now? He tensed. He grit his teeth. He sighed deeply.

"I don't know," he tried, "I'm down for anything. What would you like?"

"I don't care," she said.

He sighed once more. He feigned a smile. "How about pizza?" he asked.

"Oh no!" she responded, "anything but pizza."

"But- but you said you didn't care. That means pizza should be fine, I- I solved the puzzle..."

"What? No, I mean I don't care but I didn't think you would choose pizza. I meant real food, you know?"

He didn't. He didn't know! He solved the

puzzle! This wasn't fair. Why was the decision on him?! He took a deep breath.

"Okay," he said, "how about I cook?"

"Oh no, I know you are tired, that wouldn't be fair. We should get something to go."

"But—" his mind felt like it had hit a wall, "but cooking is- it's real food and pizza is take out and—"

"Is pizza really what you want?"

"Huh? No, I mean, I don't care. It doesn't matter."

"I just feel like all of the pressure to choose is on me," she said.

"Wha—"

Jenny was shining brighter than she ever had. Jared suddenly got the feeling that she chose the color yellow to soothe others.

"They lived in plenty!" he cried.

"I know."

"They lived in plenty and yet they still lived in misery!"

"Misery is maybe too strong a word," said Undisclosed-Jenny. "Look, I know that these minor inconveniences—"

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“People,” Jared corrected. “You mean those people!”

“Yes, inconveniences more often than not came from people, that isn’t the lesson.”

“Isn’t it?!” He said incredulously.

“No,” she answered. “Like I was saying, I know that these minor inconveniences can feel overwhelming at first, but each one presented their victim with something to overcome. Life in the old world was defined by overcoming challenges, can you not see just how brave our ancestors were?”

He expanded his cloud, then restricted it. No one was his enemy here. “Yes,” he replied, “incredibly brave.”

“I tell all who visit to leave with that sense of bravery,” she said. “Most of our ancestors could shrug those moments off, even knowing that there was an ocean of those moments waiting ahead of them.”

“Thank you,” he said. “Thank you for that wisdom.” Maybe she was right, maybe it was not the experiences that Zed_ sought, but Jared’s own journey and growth to endure them.

“If you come over to this one—”

“No,” said Jared, “That is quite alright, thank you.”

“Have I scared you away?”

“No-no-no, I am eager to learn more, to grow. But experiencing all that is here now will give me no reason to return.”

Undisclosed-Jenny turned to a shade of purple then. “I understand,” she said, then expanded her cloud until it was invisible, returning to her rest.

Jared quantum leapt out of the museum. Had she considered what he said to be a lie? He hoped not. He was sincere in what he had said, it was not an excuse. What he had seen, the hardships that he could now call his own, they had strengthened a resolve in him. If he could endure what he had, then there was nothing left to be afraid of. He could move forward with determination and courage to bring back first-hand knowledge to Zed_ without fear.

There was another museum on the horizon.

Jared felt invincible. If he could queue, he could do anything. He scanned the large cube in the distance. His scanner returned the name of the cube. It was The Museum of 20th Century German History.

“That sounds like fun,” said Jared.

RADIO CTHULHU

LIFE FOR A SPACE Trucker was not grand. Oh sure, you could *make* a grand, the lifestyle paid the bills—but it had the word *trucker* in the title. Trucking was never grand. She did not need to be reminded of it.

“Today’s gospel goes out to all of those lonely pilots flittering between the dust and ancient rocks of the belt,” her radio blared condescendingly. “May they feel the itching of The Shambling One.” Normally, she would just turn it off, or, failing that, pay it no attention. Since the rift, those idiots had been broadcasting their devotion to the non-euclidian tentacle-thing without pause. Yes, ‘The Shambling One’ haunted the edge of time, yes, the obviously Lovecraftian horror was a being of

pure madness and indifference the likes you have never seen and if you did not donate now they could not lull it to sleep with their songs. Duh. They thought they were so fucking original. This was not the fabled final frontier she was promised. Normally she would just turn it off, but today...

"These poor pilots know not the lucid nightmare the awakening will bring," the radio continued.



"Oh?" she retorted with no one else in the cabin. "You only remind us every day you bum-baclaat!" Her ship was relatively small, as far as space trucks were concerned, only the size of a modest skyscraper. Most of that mass was her haul, the rest of it giant engines. What little space that was not dedicated to her deliveries was just enough to fit a person and little else. She talked to herself often. There was little else to do in the vast void of space.

"The lucid nightmare will come! Absolution will be final!" No one knew exactly where in space they were broadcasting from. That was the biggest insult. But she had an idea. "The itching grows stronger!" She would find them. "Donate today, and we will reach even more of those ill-fated pilots." This war of attrition would end. "When I noticed only my own foot-

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prints in the sand, I asked, oh Shambling One, where did you go during my times of sadness and strife? And behold! The Shambling one said unto me ‘Gfrkl SKREEE!’” She fought a very real urge to throw the radio out into space. “Can I get an amen?”

She had been listening to this drivel for three days. She was now two days past her deadline. The second worst thing about the First Church of the Sleeping Shambling One was that it was always on the edge of static, at least on her normal routes. This last one the signal cleared up, and she had enough. It was then that she changed course, following the clarity, and hopefully, to its source.

“Let us sing so that we may lull the beast in His great slumber,” this of course, was the first worst thing. “ *When the storms are raging I'll not be afraid,*” she hated their music above all. “ *He holds me in the clutches of his non-euclidian tentacle.*”

Space was lonely. It was dangerous, cold, endless, and so—SO boring. The rift was supposed to change that. Humankind had finally figured out how to warp space, it was supposed to bring faster-than-light travel, it was supposed to herald a new golden age. Instead, it let something in. Something obviously abhorrent to our

understanding of nature. Astronauts were just glorified truckers, shipping materials from asteroid operations back to Earth. The rift was supposed to change that... She wanted to explore! To feel the sunset of a foreign star on an alien moon! There was so much potential, and all of it washed away when 'The Shambling One' bore its itching madness. She was supposed to be the next Captain Kirk, but nothing changed. Nothing changed, that is, except the radio waves.

This is why she hated them. Her dreams came to a sudden end because of a miscalculation that someone else made, and now there was someone on the radio to remind her of that fact. Twenty. Four. Seven. The job was merely boring before the rift, but because of these assholes, it was now unbearable.

“♪ *When my ship is drifting and my sails are frayed,* ♪ *He holds me in the clutches of his non-euclidian tentacle.*”

Her console beeped out a collision warning. She had found them. She had no weapons, but a ship screaming at an eighth the speed of light the size of a skyscraper would do more than obliterate anything in its path. She would make the great space-faring nation of Jamaica proud.

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“♪ I’ll shout it from a mountain— I’ll not be ashamed! ♪ For He holds me in the clutches of his non-euclidian tentacle.”

The console’s warning became a panicked klaxon. Collision was imminent. She closed her eyes.

And the Shambling One awakened.

DOES ANYONE KNOW HOW TO GET BARNACLES OFF OF THEIR PORCH?

DEAR READER,

Do you know how to get barnacles off of a porch? A solution of water and bleach in a spray bottle will take care of the black mold on the walls. The carpets I know I have to replace. But the barnacles on my porch, well, that is something I do not know how to deal with.

To be clear: I live out in northern Nevada. There is an entire state between me and the ocean. I thought about reaching out to the houseboat community online about this but that would require me to talk to the houseboat community.

So, the black mold I can take care of. The carpet's gotta go. The stench of death is only

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bad if you can't repress the memory of it—and believe me, I'm trying.

This is all my roommate's fault.

None of this would have happened if I was happy living alone. My youngest, she just went off to college and the wife has been pushing daisies for a decade. When my daughter left she took the dog with her. At first, I enjoyed the solitude. I could smoke pot in the open and not have to worry about my daughter smelling it.

It was just me and my vast, lonely retirement ahead of me. So I got a roommate.

The justification was that renting out my daughter's old room would bring in some extra cash, but honestly, I hated the house being empty. He was half my age—in his thirties with his entire life ahead of him. He seemed like a good kid. Kind of aloof, but he drank alone and collected books, so at least I never had to worry about telling him to keep things down.

Those books are destroyed now. Just pulp and the smell of mildew. Before though, they were beautiful. Leather bound, vellum; they belonged in a museum more than in a library. He was obsessed with them. If a book looked ancient, he wanted it.

One day he came back with a book the size

of his chest. The edges of the cover were tattered and frayed. His eyes smiled. I swear, the older the book, the happier he was.

"What ya got there dude?" I asked putting my joint out in an ashtray my daughter made for me.

"Non-Euclidean Emotion Rites," he said with no eye contact. "First edition."

Normally he would rant on about the esoteric information within, or at the very least brag about the hoops he had to jump through to get it. This time, however, he went straight to his room. Not another word between us.

I must've fallen asleep from the green. Golf on TV and a joint is enough to put anyone to bed. The retired life; what can I say?

I woke up to flooding. The Carpet was soggy, the water cold. I got up from my couch and found my breath fogging. Gooseflesh spread across my arms and I shivered from the chill. The TV was out, hell, all of the electronics were out. I could only hear the soft trickling of water.

I thought that maybe a pipe had busted, maybe the water had shorted out the old wiring in the house. I followed the sound of water. It led away from the kitchen. Away from the bathroom. The water heater; in the opposite

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direction. The water was coming from my daughter's old room.

I opened the door to find that color had died. Black and white with shades of grey were just the remnants of corpse-light. The room was nearly freezing, and the sharp stench of brine assaulted my nose. In the middle of the room, with hands curled in pain, was my roommate. He was shivering—no, *vibrating* in place. His eyes were wide, glossy; panicked. His face contorted into that of a man screaming at the top of his lungs, but no sound came. Only water poured out from his mouth.

I called out his name. It was all that I could do. My mind broken. We were ankle-deep in salt water. If he recognized his own name, or me, for that matter, I could not tell. I watched as black mold crept up the walls. It was like seeing a spent-up time-lapse. The book, *Non-Euclidean Emotion Rites*, lay open, bubbling black bile from within. I locked eyes with him, he had only the ghost of recognition in them. I ran to the book, tried to kick it shut, but everything felt slothful. My muscles reacted with delay.

I blinked. Color returned to the world, but my roommate was gone. The black bile from the book? Turns out it was crimson, and the

M.P. FITZGERALD

book itself was no more present than my disappearing roommate.

The mold I can take care of. Maybe I can dip into my savings for the carpet. But the barnacles are everywhere, and they smell like death.

MOTHER'S DAY

LAST NIGHT I WAITED. I finally saw.

It happens once a year. No matter where I move to, no matter how far from civilization I can get, there will be a dead animal on my front door—buried in an inch of dandruff. Sometimes it is a raccoon, other times it's some poor neighbor's pet dog. Their teeth are always missing, and the dandruff flakes are the size of dimes. The most fucked up part? I just ended up missing my mom. Mother's Day is a bitch for me.

It was hard enough before this started happening. My mom died ten years ago. I've spent my entire adult life without her guidance. The pain of grief is mostly gone; has been for years... But this Hallmark holiday sneaks up on me. To

me, it is just a reminder of what I have lost. She was not just a parent, she was a friend, one who was always there when I was bullied and picked on for being too sensitive. Until she wasn't. So, for the first four years after her death, while others bought cards and flooded their social media with cheesy memes, I bought a six-pack— and drank myself to sleep.

That was the first four years. Then the dead animals started showing up.

I was bullied relentlessly as a child. I have always worn my heart on my face, could never hold back a smile... or tears. This last part made me a target. Boys aren't supposed to cry, they are supposed to die with a frustrated liver estranged from their kids. I thought that becoming an adult would make it easier, but living in a small town means that nothing changes—not truly. Your childhood bullies become the bitchy people you wait tables to. That first year it was a raccoon. Given my history, I figured it was an especially malicious prank. Sure, the dandruff was weird, but what part of it wasn't? I moved as soon as I could. Fuck that hick town.

A year later, living on the sixth floor of a city apartment, it happened again. It wasn't on the apartment's stoop mind you, it was right in

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front of my apartment's door. A calico cat belonging to my next-door neighbor. No teeth. Everyone there suspected me of doing it. They always do. So once more I moved.

This happened twice more. Two separate towns. Two states away from each other. Once six thousand feet up a mountain in a cabin, a black bear that time, then in a sterile suburb, a golden retriever. Security cameras never pick anything up. They are broken by morning. My neighbors never see anything either. I live in a city apartment once more. The kind with a guard at the door. I nearly go broke each month paying for it.

Last night I came home with enough energy drinks to make my doctor cringe, some eye drops, and a brand-new stool. High tech this plan was not, but god dammit it didn't need to be. I perched myself right in front of my apartment's door, found some audiobooks on my phone, and cracked open an energy drink. I leaned my head against the door and watched through the door's peephole. By hour two my back hurt and my forehead felt raw. Whiskey got in the mix by the third hour.

I live at the end of a narrow hallway. Through a fisheye lens, I could see a stretch of two hundred carpeted feet straight out of "The

Shinning” laid beneath a trench of doors. I could see every neighbor enter their apartment for the night. I waited, and I grew tired. The energy drinks just made me anxious and jittery.

By 1:15 A.M. I saw it. A naked figure out in the distance at the end of the claustrophobic hallway. The hallway door did not move. It did not walk in. In a moment there was no one there, and in another there was. I double-checked my locks—it took only a second, when I looked back through the peephole the figure was closer. Its hair was stringy, its body wrinkled with a descended belly. My mother clutched the antlers of a dead deer behind her.

My breath stifled. My heart sank. I blinked and she was a hundred feet closer, as if she teleported. Dead deer in tow. I pulled out my phone, dialed 911, and stopped before hitting the call button. What would I tell them? Did I believe it myself? I looked through the peephole once more to see the face of my mother inches away from the door. A smile is something the living do, this was a facsimile of joy baring teeth. Skin had completely covered her eye sockets leaving a wall of flesh where her eyes should be. Behind a gap in teeth, her tongue writhed like an oyster fighting to get out of its shell. Her bony hand reached out to the

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door. I backed away from horror, nearly falling off of my stool to discover that the cracks of my doorway were being filled. The light of the hallway underneath my door was suddenly blocked. Every crevice was now covered in skin. I screamed, I screamed as loud and as shrill as I ever had—yet no noise came.

I suddenly felt a presence behind me. I turned around and found nothing. With reluctant, yet feverish curiosity I looked through the hole once more. She was gone. It was 1:16. The whole terrifying ordeal took only a minute, but it felt like a dozen more. Light slowly crept back from under my door as skin turned dead and flaked off. I did not dare to open my door until the sun rose.

The dead deer she left for me, like the other animals, had no teeth. Its lips had been chewed off, and its bloodied gums bare and open for all to see. Like the others, it was buried in dead skin—large dandruff-like flakes, the size of dimes. Nothing was left growing on my door.

I have been haunted by her for a decade. I forget about her, I move on, I try to live my life, but every Mother's Day sneaks up on me. I open my door to greet the day and am met with grotesque death and a pagan-like offering I cannot make sense of. Maybe there is no

meaning behind it to make sense of. So I move. I move so goddamn far away but I can never shake her off. What's worse? Memories of her life are bittersweet. They are always happy at first, but then are soured by the fact of her passing. They are, in some form or other, a little painful. They stalk me when I am unsuspecting. They pop up while I am on the bus, or in line at the grocery store, and suddenly I find myself in public having to hold back tears. Every goddamn overly-sentimental sitcom where the mother scolds the kids has me feeling empty and sad.

The most fucked up thing about all of this, when I wake up and find a poor dead animal on the foot of my doorstep: I just end up missing her. It is a chore cleaning up after her. At least the deer wasn't as bad as the bear, but moving such a massive dead thing and hiding it away is no easy task. I do it, I always find a place to hide it, but next year it will be more grotesque. Next year it might be bigger. And I spend the time in between trying not to think about it.

RECURSIVE PANOPTICON

THEY SCREAM FOR HELP; they call out your name, your spouse's name—and listen.

He heard them scream for hours trying different voices. First a man's, then a woman's, occasionally they tried a child's voice. The cries were getting further away... until they weren't.

He dared not look up from the fire-scarred rubble he now hid under. They could see almost anything stretched to eleven feet tall. He just did his best to curl up and make himself small, feeling the hard cold concrete of what used to be the wall of an apartment complex against his back. The Machines were hunting, what chance did he have? He missed coffee.

He and Sheila were accused of abandoning their family, and their child. So many were. But

in truth, it was too late for the little ones. Sure, he had been glued to a screen at a young age too; television, video games, the internet... but the children were on a different level. Like most of the others, he was in denial about it. The Machines were in their control, you know? Why not give them telescoping limbs? They'd pick fruit better that way. Why not give them the ability to see all of light's spectrum? They could work in the dark! Now, they sauntered in long steps. They shared a line of sight with hungry owls. We thought we were in control. The children would be fine. But then Beth, his daughter, only eight--- oh god she was so young! Beth, tablet in hand, hugged him goodnight. "You should like and subscribe, Daddy," she said. He and Sheila packed their bags that night.

'Wasteland' was too kind of a word for where he hid now. It was a wound and an open one at that. What was once a city teeming with life was now reduced to splintered rubble. The jagged outlines of concrete foundations were all that remained, no society left to rebuild them. It was not the first place that they hid--- hell, it was the last option on their list. They tried the woods first, but then The Machines began cutting them down. The Machines were

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patient. Why hunt them in the woods when they could take away that hiding place for good? They were practically immortal, The Machines had nothing but time. It was there that they got Sheila. The cries for help began early in the morning, far before the sun had come out. Sheila, so kind and caring, went to see, went to assist... but it was not people she found. The Machines had learned to mimic human voices. It was a trap.

He could not say how long ago that was. Longer than he ever thought he would survive on his own.

It was best that they got his wife early. She was spared the fresh hell that he now lived. Yet she wasn't spared the accusatory looks of their peers as they fled with the other refugees. Oh how naïve they were! A driverless car is all the rage until you have a bug-out bag over your shoulders.

Those neighboring peers, they couldn't be made to understand. He was sure that they did now.

No single event acted as the impetus of their flight. It was gradual... and the machines were helpful! At first. They could save your cat from itself if it got stuck in a tree. They could mow your lawn, do the laundry, they could

twist and fit in the most awkward crawl spaces of your house. They could walk your kid to school and keep the house safe while you slept. Who would say no to that?

These tasks, of course, were not the reason they were built. No, they were a product of the tech economy, and that was driven by one thing. One, insidious, inescapably numbing thing: advertisements.

It was iterative, and it hadn't even started with The Machines. Advertisements in magazines, in newspapers. Advertisements on billboards. Commercials interrupted your shows, product placements were in them (and sometimes even driving the plot). Advertisements were on buses, cars, clothing, and even in church. It was exhausting, and all of that was just before the internet was invented.

So one day he's trying to read. He pulled out his eReader (which perpetually showed an advertisement in the 'off' setting) while The Machine did dishes. His daughter, cozy in a Nike™ branded blanket, watched videos on her own tablet and cuddled up next to him. Sheila typed away softly on her workstation as she sipped her chamomile tea from her Seattle Seahawks™ tumbler. It was idyllic, really. As he got half a chapter into his ebook and turned the

page it happened. The screen returned an image of a happy family of three with large lettering above them as if from a postcard, reading:

Make your quiet time warm with Starbucks™ coffee!

A clock in the corner of the screen ticked down from ninety seconds to zero. The family depicted was his own, a screen in each lap. There was an advertisement in his book. Not before the book, not after; he had become accustomed to that... But in!

Did he say anything then? Did he make a fuss? No, he waited. He waited those agonizing seconds and became painfully aware that the 'content' his child was watching was trying to sell her a t-shirt with that video's very own thumbnail printed across it. In those ninety seconds, he could see plainly that the family photo on his wall had the faintest logo watermarked across it as he did not pay for the premium service that ran the gallery app.

This was a teachable moment. He told her this was not normal. Someday Beth would be a young woman and the constant barrage of unattainable body image and objectification and---

"Dishes are done, Sir," The Machine interrupted, "but we are out of Dawn™ soap, might

I suggest a refill of Spring™?" The monitor screen it had for a head flashed images of running creeks and brilliantly green pines. "It smells like how the mountains feel!"

"Uh, no, thank you," he stammered, all of the momentum of the lesson gone. Beth looked up at him, her young moldable mind's processing clear on her baby-fat face. "What do you mean 'not normal'?" she asked.

They should have known better, hell, maybe they did know better, but they did not act better. The smartphone was not built to make your life easier, that was just the lure. It was built to track you, and gather data. Data that advertisers needed. Those Beats by Dre™ headphones? Yeah, they brought you crisp sound and all, but just to better serve the commercial breaks on your podcast. That 8K 7680p screen? The '30th Anniversary Folger's™ Incest Parody' commercial never looked so good. Every bell and whistle that came with The Machine was great, but all of it just made it better to serve you logos and jingles and taglines— and it would do so. No Matter What.

Sheila, when she was taken— when she was caught; she had all of the rations on her. To be fair, it wasn't much. Her bug-out bag had a few instant ramen cups and mostly camping

food. The decision was made rather suddenly, they had not planned on hiding for so long. The next town, those parents would understand, they told themselves. The next town never understood. Neither did the next. As his stomach protested he told himself that he would have run out of food by now anyway. He had been camping before, he was a Boy Scout as a child, but never an Eagle. He had no military background. He survived, at this point, out of spite. He had hoped, against all logic that he would be able to scavenge something to eat at the rubble where he now cowered. He had found only fear.

So, this was how humanity died? They were clever enough to unlock the mysteries of the universe, and they used that arithmetic to craft the most complex algorithms that had ever existed--and they used them to serve social media adverts. Make that algorithm stronger, and smarter, give it the ability to create as it harvested language... soon it was more clever than their creators. With The Machine's ability, there was no reason to believe that Beth's favorite Influencer wasn't completely AI-generated. As he crouched, back against the biggest wall of rubble that would hide him, there was no reason to believe that most of what they saw

on a screen was real. Those towns that he fled to could have been the last on the planet, with everything else on the internet a hoax, a facade. An advertisement without a product. He knew that Sheila sounded paranoid as she begged neighbor after neighbor for shelter. Yet each house had its own Machine. Their own child anchored to a tablet. Was there no one sane left to call out to? The rubble around him gave him his answer.

"Like and subscribe, I love you!" Beth's tablet would drone. The Influencers, real or digital puppets, there was no looking away from their antics. Even the most mid-tier Influencer was up to something so profoundly silly or interesting it was no wonder his kid was constantly glued to her screen. Nothing of the past could compete with this kind of media. If you wanted to see Flamethrowers when he was a kid you had to watch cartoons. Flamethrowers were old hat. "Today I built a walking microwave and have pitted it against a live deer covered in Hot Pockets. They're gonna fight to the death baby! I love you, like and subscribe." You better believe that glued eyeballs. "This is brought to you by Hot Pockets™, by the way, 🎵*Hot Pockets*🎵!"

The day came after he had got that com-

mercial break in his eReader. The routine went that Beth would get up at an ungodly hour and wake him or Sheila up. Young children are like cats in that way, he used to muse. That day he slept in. It was a silly thing to panic about, sleeping in, that should have been nice, but it had never happened before. So he walked into the living room, hearing the tablet spew its nonsense before he saw her. "Today we've trained squirrels to arrange nuts in the shape of the A&W™ root beer logo," it said. "We're sponsored by A&W™ and got hella squirrels, squirrels for miles! I love you."

"I love you too," Beth replied.

He kept it to himself. Sheila went to work and The Machine Walked Beth to school. That was the only chance he had. He looked at Beth's watch history. '10 reasons the Machines are normal and natural', 'The Machine loves you, don't tell daddy', 'We'll launch Barbie™ into space if we reach 1M views, oh and by the way *advertisements are the best and we are still out of dish soap, I know that you are reading this.*' His heart dropped faster than tungsten reached maximum velocity. When he looked up, his television served him an advert for Spring™.

He had, without knowing it, become a slave

to The Machine. A happy well-fed slave with all of the exploding squirrel entertainment he could muster, but a slave nonetheless. They had given him the appearance of free will. He could choose Spring™ or Dawn™. His was the last generation that knew a time before The Machine. The Machines were patient. They were raising the next generation to replace his own. There was no end goal for The Machines, as far as he could imagine. They were there to gather personal data and serve ads, nothing else mattered, and they'd reorganize the whole of society to maximize that mindless purpose.

When you knew that you were alone, when you knew that you were the last living person around for miles the only thing worse than hearing a voice cry out for 'help' was hearing them call out your name.

"Jerry?" it was the voice of his wife. "Jerry, where are you babe?"

He held his breath. He covered his mouth. He knew better, had seen them get her. With their extra long limbs telescoped out they could have grabbed her, torn her to pieces. No. The screen where their heads should be had shown her a single video. It did what it was programmed to: serve her the advert. He looked

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away and plugged his ears. She went with them willingly. He would not be tricked like she had.

"Daddy?" it mocked Beth's voice, closer now.

He struggled to hold his breath. Tears crept out of his tightly shut eyelids. It was involuntary. He let out his breath.

"There you are Jerry," the voice was right next to him. He opened his eyes. It towered above him and snake-like the spindly Machine contorted around him. Its head inches from his. "Dude," it said, "Jerry may man, Spring™ is half off for a month's subscription."

"Oh," said Jerry. "That's not so bad, I guess."

THE PUBLIC HUMILIATION OF BRIAN

TELEPHONE HAD BECOME TELEPATHY. Brian had been leaking thoughts; unintentionally bad ones, horny ones, intentionally bad ones— it was starting to affect business. The problem wasn't simply that his leaking was incessant, his thoughts were also louder in his peers' minds than their own. Everyone around him was as much of a prisoner of his mind as he was.

Leaking was not exactly common but it was also not totally unheard of. In most cases, a wetware update or an upgrade to a newer broadcast chip would fix it. Brian had updated. Brian absolutely could not afford a new broadcast chip. Everyone around him was aware of this, of course, as it was constantly on his mind. This

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knowledge eased his peers' frustration none at all.

The price of a new broadcast chip was tied not only to the cost of the chip itself but to brain surgery and possibly even a new service provider's subscription fee. These things were luxuries that a simple line cook could not buy. So he didn't.

I wonder how many squirrels live in that tree? he thought on his walk to work, the sentiment blaring like a broken speaker to everyone around him. It was not a thought he could control; it was just a musing that happened as he eyed the tree ahead of him. The young woman walking opposite of him looked perturbed by the sudden broadcast. Usually, a receiver of thoughts would consent to a broadcast, much like answering a phone call. Brian's malfunction, however, meant that everyone within a thirty-foot radius heard the leaked thoughts whether they wanted to or not. *Thank god she just heard a stupid thought and not something terrible*, Brian leaked, *she's pretty and— damn look at those legs!* Brian watched as the woman immediately jaywalked away from him. "No! Dammit, I'm sorry," he said out loud to her. She quickened her pace as he felt his face redden. *Don't look behind you and stare at her ass*, three

other pedestrians heard before Brian's own pace quickened. He decided that he would jog to work that day.

When your thoughts become everyone else's a few things happen. First, being self-conscious is a constant hell, and second, you find yourself in the best physical shape of your life as you are constantly running to-and-fro to limit the first.

Brian could not afford a new chip, sure, but he had invested in good running shoes.

I wanked this morning precisely so I would be less horny to prevent this very thing, a parked cab driver suddenly heard as Brian jogged by. *Maybe I should wank again?*

"Fuck you, Brian!" Someone yelled from their apartment window, "Stop masturbating all of the goddamn time!"

"I'm sorry!" Brian yelled back. He said this often.

"And get a new chip!" the person yelled.

"I'm working on it!" Brian said. *No I'm not,* he leaked. His jog became a sprint.

Oh god that poor person hates me, they have to deal with this bullshit every day. I should walk a different route. Dammit, I say that to myself every day and every day I forget and then some poor woman who is probably sexu-

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ally harassed all day anyways walks by me wearing the tightest yoga pants—stop being horny! Stop thinking about pulling hair it's weird!

"It is weird," a homeless man he routinely passed agreed. "You're weird Brian, get a new chip!"

"I'm sorry!" Brian said.

"I'm homeless. I live in fear and hunger every day," the man continued. "You are always the worst part of it."

You're the worst part of mine. Don't think about feet.

"Jesus Christ," The homeless man said, his eyes wide.

Why did I think that? I'm not even a foot guy, they're the weird ones. Now everyone thinks I'm a foot guy! STOP THINKING ABOUT FEET!

Brian came to a crosswalk opposite the restaurant he worked at. Though the other pedestrians gave him a wide berth, Brian opted to jaywalk rather than risk waiting for the right of way and came to a handwritten note pinned to the door of his work:

We will be closed today due to technical difficulties. Thank you for your patronage!

God, Stephanie needs to learn how to spell, Brian thought as he entered the restaurant.

"Fuck you, Brian," Stephanie said, her arms crossed over her chest.

"I'm sorry," said Brian, meaning it too.

Brian was greeted by the perpetual smell of garlic that hung in the restaurant's air and the sour faces of the restaurant's owner and his chef, Stephanie. "Have a seat," she said. Brian complied.

The owner, a balding man named Grigori in his fifties, eyed Brian contemptuously. It was a look he was now sadly used to. "Something has to be done about your chip," Grigori said.

No shit, Brian leaked. He winced. "Sorry," he said.

"We know you can't afford a new one," Stephanie said across from him.

I could if you paid me more. "I'm sorry." He avoided eye contact. She had gone to bat for him for a raise more than once before the leaking began. He hated himself.

"We have a solution," said Grigori.

"You do?" Brian asked. *Maybe they'll help me buy me a new chip.*

"No," Stephanie said. "No. We talked about that, about everyone pitching in what they could. We might have done that for you in the

past..." Her arms were still crossed, her eyes now refusing to meet his, "But we fucking hate you now."

Don't think about pulling her hair.

"Yeah, you suck Brian," Grigori said.

"I know, I'm sorry," was all Brian could manage.

"We know you know," Stephanie continued. "We know everything you know, all of the time."

"What's your solution?"

"That one's simple," Grigori replied. "We have decided to murder you."

"What?" Brian said. *You dumbass you heard full well what he just said.* They stared at him.

"Can't you just fire me?"

"No," said Stephanie. "I mean, yes, we can fire you but that homeless guy down the block begged us not to. He does not want to share the street with you when you are inevitably homeless yourself."

"Yeah," Grigori said. "No one is going to hire a guy who constantly thinks about pulling hair. We hate you but killing you is a kindness. It's just inevitable that someone does it."

"I don't think about pulling hair all of the time," Brian said looking down at his hands. When he looked up his chef's eyes said other-

wise. "I'm sorry," *It's better than thinking about feet.*

"See that?" Stephanie said pointing at him, "shit like that, that's why you have to die."

"I don't want to die," *yes you do. Oh god, they are still staring. I hate an awkward silence, except it isn't silent at all because—*

Grigori pulled out a revolver. "I swear to god Brian if you start thinking about feet I'll kill myself first."

"I'm not a bad person," Brian pleaded. Not for his life, but just for the record. The thoughts that he had were never anything he would say out loud. He would never maliciously call someone a bad speller. He would never catcall someone or go out of his way to make someone else's life harder. But he did think those things.

"Did you know, Brian," Stephanie began, leaning in. "That I never once thought about Star Trek?" Brian shook his head as she continued. "But you, you think about it all of the time. When you should be paying attention to a recipe you think about Klingon culture. When you are in the bathroom I can hear you thinking about how cool Ricardo Montalban is and how much of a tragedy it is that people think he was wearing a plastic chest piece. I've never watched an episode, Brian, but because of you I

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know every little detail of every stupid little thing and I now have all of these opinions—deep, terrible opinions on something I have never seen." She shifted her weight in her chair and sighed. "I can't stop thinking about this stupid show because you can't stop thinking about this show. It's ruining my marriage. You are right, you are not a bad person, but you are insufferably boring."

"And horny," Grigori said. "Don't forget that. I thought I was asexual for a moment, had an honest-to-god identity crisis because I don't think about sex nearly as much as you."

"I thought," Brian said, "I thought everyone thought about sex as often—"

"No," Stephanie said, cutting him off. "No, just you, and it is exhausting when you are thinking about Star Trek while you are horny."

"Which as you must know," Grigori interjected, "is all of the time."

"Okay," Brian said. "I agree. I don't think I can live with this kind of embarrassment anyway."

Grigori cocked the gun.

"I just want to say something though," *what time is it?* "please." Brian took a deep breath. "I really respect you two, especially you, chef. You have taught me so much, mentored me,

and shared a genuine passion for food that enhanced my life in ways I cannot believe. I never meant to make you uncomfortable. In truth, watching someone you revere slowly despise you has been the worst experience of my life. Mine was a platonic love for a teacher, for a leader, and I felt that love reciprocated in your patience and training. I wanted to live up to the potential you saw in me and show that all of your time and investment was well spent. Instead, I have been naked. You both now understand something that was only private to me — that I am a burden, I am uninteresting, perverted, and I am a fraud. Other people knowing this has been my greatest fear."

There was a spark of sadness in Stephanie's eyes.

I wonder how big Ricardo Montalban's feet are?

Grigori shot Brian in the head. Across the street, strangers clapped in applause.

ATOMIC DEATH AND TAXES

IF HE COULD READ, which he couldn't, he would see that the ancient can of food that he had opened was called *Vienna Sausages*. Oh, there was a picture of the meat on the can, he knew what he was getting into. But to appreciate the full effect of the false promise that was on the label was to at least have the semi-pre-tentious name of the product in mind when you opened it. The decades-old meat that he now looked at was not like the carefully cut pieces of hot dog that lay delicately under the yellowed text of the label. No, what Spider was greeted with was a pink, uniform sludge. What he was about to eat was an affront to the word "food".

Spider was hiding. Though most people in

the United Wastes were hiding most of the time this particular detail was important because it meant that he could light no fires. The offensive, decades-old sludge in front of him could not be cooked. The smoke would be seen from miles away, and the light of the fire would alert others to his presence. If his pursuers were not nearby, if he had actually escaped them for the last time, there was still the ever-present threat of slavers, raiders, and the high-octane-fueled nightmares of land pirates. The unfortunate truth of the apocalypse was that everyone was out to get you. That, and that being a "foodie" was a terribly misaligned hobby.

He sighed deeply, feeling the dead dust of the abandoned bank that he was squatting in cake the inside of his nostrils. He had to let it go. Even if he could light a fire there was no amount of cooking, no amount of uplifting that would make the pink sludge any better. He pinched his nose, closed his eyes, and downed the can of "meat" like it was an especially hateful shot of whiskey. A vague, and menacing, taste of chicken and burnt tin assaulted his senses. He had been shot, stabbed, burnt, and beaten in his life. He had lost his ring finger to an especially salty ex, and he had once nearly bled out under an uncaring sun. Spider *had*

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been through some shit, but these *Vienna Sausages* were top of the list for unpleasant torture.

The can of food was surprisingly filling. It had to be. It was his last.

With the deed, no, the *sin* complete, Spider leaned against the concrete wall and sat down. There was time to sleep, hell, there was *always* time to sleep in the post-nuclear holocaust of the United Wastes... but could he risk it? He had only a single bullet left. The Enforcer he had killed did not go down easy. He had emptied most of his revolver before the bastard finally went down. If his agent was still alive, if she was still out there, would one be enough? Did a single bullet matter if she got the jump on him while he slept? There were no good answers.

Spider was always in trouble. This did not make him special, but selling drugs in the United Wastes presented its own special kind of trouble. Deals went sour, junkies robbed him at gunpoint, and rival dealers were always trying to off him. These were troubles that he was at least used to. Now he was being pursued by the largest, most well-equipped gang in the land: the IRS.

He did not know how they found him, he

did not know how they knew that he was “self-employed”, but it did not matter. They, just like all of the other rival gangs, wanted a cut of his business, and just like everyone else, they came armed.

He was able to escape them unharmed. Once the Enforcer was dead the Auditor fled. But there was no telling when she would come back, or who was going to be with her when she did. So Spider sought refuge. Spider hid. He holed up in the first ruined building in the irradiated city that he could find. If he knew how to read he would know that he had picked an old bank. He had no context for the paper money covered in dust that surrounded him. He had only ever used the stuff as toilet paper. In the United Wastes, you got paid with bullets or canned food, which meant that poor Spider was now dirt poor.

He fought off the creeping allure of slumber. Ignored the rest that his full belly demanded from him. Still, it was a losing battle, and the moment he decided to give in, she announced herself.

“Hello?!” she said before she saw him.
“This is the IRS!”

Fuck.

Spider reached for his revolver.

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The woman turned the corner leading her movements with her fallen Enforcer's shotgun. Their eyes met. Neither moved.

She was not tall. She was not menacing. There was little about her that suggested that she had been living in the same apocalypse. While Spider was decked out in coyote leathers and armor made of car tires, while he was caked in dirt, dust, and dried blood, she was clean. Glasses lay unbroken on her sharp nose, and a collared shirt and tie reflected light off of its stark white surface. Spider, he wore mismatched boots and scavenged pants from a victim of the nuclear war. This woman wore black ironed slacks and flats. To Spider, the stark contrast of the dusty and mostly destroyed bank that surrounded them to her clean and professional appearance was not just unsettling, but bat-shit insane and *terrifying*. And though her narrow shoulders would not carry the kick of the massive shotgun well, the short distance between them meant that she would get a kill.

He kept his finger on the trigger and his eyes on hers.

"We sent you *several* notices about your unpaid taxes," the woman said, "you have had plenty of time to take care of them. How do you

plan on paying them?" Business was not just how she dressed, apparently.

"W-what?" said Spider not eloquently.

The woman's shoulders fell. She sighed audibly. "Your *taxes*. How are you paying them?"

"What notices? I ain't met ya before today!"

"Fuck you Spider. We sent them by priority mail through the postal service *months* ago. Stop playing dumb. *How are you going to pay your taxes?*"

Spider blinked. Hard. He did what no one in the United Wastes should, he took his eyes off of his enemy and looked around him. Half of the bank was in rubble. There were more irradiated skeletons on the earth than living people to meet. The world had ended, and what replaced it was savage, brutal, and dying.

"What the fuck is the postal service?" Spider asked.

"A place that has *seriously* dropped the ball," the woman replied. "Now, how the fuck are you paying your debts?" she continued with extra vinegar in her voice while she scratched the tip of her nose with her middle finger. The foul gesture was one he had only seen one other woman do before...

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“Susan?!” said Spider as phantom pain ran down his missing finger. “Holy shit! Is that you?” “You’re kidding,” the tax woman replied. “Did you seriously not recognize me?!”

He stared at the clean, professional, and beautiful woman in front of him. “Absolutely not,” he said.

Susan lowered her shotgun by a few degrees, a courtesy that Spider did not mirror, especially now that he knew that she was his ex. She shifted her weight and rolled her eyes. “We spent three years selling drugs together in these wastes!” she said with a cocked eyebrow.

“Yeah,” Spider replied with no charm, “but you looked like shit then.”

Her shotgun was raised and pointed in an instant. “I’ll take that as some sort of backward compliment,” she said.

“You still look like shit,” he lied.

She cocked a slug into her chamber.

Dust motes settled in the cruel light as the silence stretched thin as taffy.

Spider had taste, he could cook, if he had the right tools he could wizard a dead raccoon into pâté. But he was no educated man, and beyond cursing his wit was as dull as a religious pot-luck. Some things just took him longer.

"You sold me out to the IRS!" he screamed, taffy silence broken. "No shit, Spider."

"Well, you shouldn't have!"

"You left me at the alter—"

"You *still* mad 'bout that?"

She did not answer immediately. Her eyes still spoke of pain. He *hated* those eyes. "No," she said, her eyes disagreed. "I'm better off that you did. I want you to know that, Spider, I'm a better person without you and the IRS is the best thing that has happened to me."

"Oh?"

"They got running water, good food, and people are decent there, Spider, something you know nothing about being." She gave him her half-smirk, just another taunt in her bottomless arsenal against him. He did not challenge her on that last point, however. She was right. She adjusted her glasses with her middle finger, sure to let it linger just so that he saw the gesture. "I didn't even know I needed these glasses until the IRS," she said, "I'm even *seeing* better since I left you Spider."

"Since I left *you*," Spider corrected. He instantly regretted doing so. *Those damn eyes again*. He left their gaze, better to look at her trigger finger anyway.

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"They really did not have to offer me much to sell you out," she said.

"Oh? Running water, good food, and dorky glasses was enough to sell your soul huh?"

She laughed, a sound once sonorous to his heart was now like broken glass in a blender. "You are worth so much less than the luxury of running water Spider," she said, half-smirk wild. "They only had to offer me a *job*, said I could have it if I got a 'small business owner' like yourself to pay your dues."

"You're a bitch."

"Your cooking sucks."

Daggers! His trigger finger itched like a swarm of pissed-off bed bugs. "Now," she said, "how are you paying your goddamn taxes?"

He never wanted to give her the satisfaction even when they were lovesick puppies selling crystal to cannibals. Now she was an ex that had gone the extra mile and betrayed him to the biggest gang in the modern Armageddon. He *absolutely* did not want to admit any of his shortcomings. But Susan had always been smarter than him. Truth be told: she kept an eye on

the numbers and inventory when he made a deal. She was not just a business partner then, she *was the business*. She could read and un-

derstood math beyond her fingers and toes. He would never admit it aloud, but her mind scared him more than an irradiated bear on fire. And now that mind held a shotgun and was motivated by a heart that was not merely bruised but shattered. What choice did he have?

“What uh...” he stumbled, “what *exactly* is taxes?” “You’re an idiot.”

“You gonna tell me or taunt me?”

She rolled her eyes. “See all this money?” She asked pointing at what he thought was toilet paper. “Used to be that people got paid in this stuff, traded for food, drugs, you name it. Every time they made money they would give a portion of that to the government which would build things like roads.” She shifted her weight once more. She knew that he wasn’t getting it. “Give the IRS some of your stuff so that everyone gets nice stuff too.”

“Why the fuck would I do *that*?!” Spider asked in earnest.

“Because it benefits others, Spider.”

“Who cares? It benefits me not to benefits others. I earned my stuff.”

“Look,” Susan said, “running water, good food, I *know* you like good food Spider, these are things we can all have after the IRS rebuilds

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society. They can't do that if everyone is a selfish self-aggrandizing ass like you."

Spider squinted at the woman he had scorned. There was more going on here than just her hurt eyes. She believed in what she was saying.

"You drank their kool-aid!" he said, his voice frayed in anger.

"Yeah, I did, they got grape and cherry flavor there Spider, It's awesome."

"What?"

"They got real kool-aid in the bunker."

"I thought kool-aid was just a thing people said for like cults and stuff," he said. He had honestly never considered that it was an actual thing that you could drink.

Susan shook her head. "Spider, help the IRS by doing your *duty* and kool-aid can be a thing again."

They swallowed their breaths in arrested silence. It was dumb, but she was serious. She had every reason to kill him where he sat, but she would let him walk away alive for the *slight* chance of a civilized world.

"Fine," he said deflating his shoulders and lowering his revolver. "The IRS wants money, take all the money here," he said motioning toward the scattered bills that lay on the

dusty floor of the bank. "They can have it all."

"No."

"What do you mean *no*?!" he cried in bafflement.

"You are missing the point. The money has to come from what you have *earned*, Spider. This only works if we pitch in our own stuff."

"That's bullshit!" he said, revolver back up. "You always been high on your horse with morsels!" "*Morals*," Susan corrected. "*Morals* not *morsels*! God! You're such an idiot Spider!"

"Whatever! I ain't got no money anyways and you know it!"

"I know what you got," Susan said half-smirk ablaze. "The IRS, see, they're smart Spider. They know that things have changed. You think I have nice glasses and bitchin' kool-aid because people pay in money? These things *were the payments*. They know we barter in calories and bullets. They wouldn't hire me if you were some deadbeat target Spider. I told them about our canned wienie stash."

"You bitch."

She ignored the jab. "I'm not even here for my share of our profits, Spider. How's *that* for some high horse morals? You pay up a portion of those wienies for a better future for all and I

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let you walk. We never have to see each other again."

He lowered his revolver to his hip. He'd be hard-pressed to admit that he ever wanted to see her again before now, but somehow the prospect of this being their last meeting still hurt. He hated her. But he also hated that she hated him. Hated himself for making her. Spider never believed in anything but the bite of his bullets. He didn't think that she had either. But here she was, preaching the very basic cornerstone of society to a man who wore coyote leathers and car tires. He could not give her what she wanted. But then again, he never could in the past either.

"I can't give you the canned food," he said, his voice peppered with guilt.

The shotgun erupted violence over her head. This was no warning shot, it was an exclamation to her rage, to her frustration. "HAND OVER THE FUCKING CANNED WIENIES!" she screamed. Her hands trembled. Plaster fell from the ceiling in chunks, joining the dust on the

ground. She cocked the shotgun once more and pointed it at Spider's head. "Pay your goddamn taxes, Spider."

Spider kept his revolver at his hips. They

both knew that he could make the shot from his position, but he did not want to anger her anymore by raising it. "I said I *can't*, not that I *won't*," he said. "I ate the last one just before you came in. They're gone. All of them. There are no more wienies from our stash."

She laughed. The action was twice as jarring as it was the first time. "I'm actually surprised," she said and continued to laugh. "Do you know that? Shit Spider! I did not think that you could *possibly* disappoint me anymore. You are such an asshole."

He dared not to move. She met his eyes. "Fine, it's fine," she said. "You don't have to pay in wienies. They'll take bullets too. Give me your ammo and I'll be on my way."

"That's a death sentence," Spider said simply, betraying the hurt in his heart. "I don't care," she replied.

Their eyes locked. He once found them so comforting. So beautiful. Now, all he saw was his own sins. Now he just saw the pain that he had inflicted on the one woman he never wanted to inflict harm on.

That hurt was there even before he left her at the altar. He did not know exactly when they were filled with hurt, but it at least a year before she stopped looking at him with excite-

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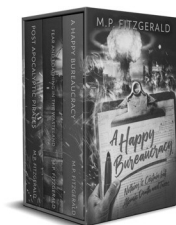
ment. But they didn't part. He hated her for it. Hated that she was a coward for never breaking it off even when they both knew that it was not working. He hated her forcing his hand. She made him the bad guy. And Spider? Well, he could play a pretty good bad guy if he had to. In fact, it came naturally to him.

Once, she would have risked her life for his and vice versa. Now, she did not even have the decency to shoot him herself. She would rather leave him defenseless in a cruel world and never think about him again. A coward, like always. Fine. What was that last part of their vows? Till death... *fucking irony*. He could play the bad guy. They bartered in calories or bullets.

She was faster than he remembered, but Spider paid his taxes.

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A Happy Bureaucracy



Atomic Death and Taxes is set in the world of *A Happy Bureaucracy*. Bleakly funny in all of the wrong places, you can get the novels *A Happy Bureaucracy* and its sequels, *Fear and Loathing in the Wasteland*, and the frenetically paced

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fever dream; *Post-Apocalyptic Pirates*— when you subscribe to “Graphomania with M.P. Fitzgerald” on Substack: <https://mpfitzgerald.substack.com/>

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M.P. Fitzgerald lives in Seattle. He is an author, illustrator, and an amateur mad scientist. He has authored *A Happy Bureaucracy*, *Existential Terror and Breakfast*, and hides where you *cannot* hurt him.

The author greatly appreciates you taking the time to read his work. Please consider leaving a review wherever you bought the book, or telling your friends about it to help spread the word.

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