

hypnagothic

#four



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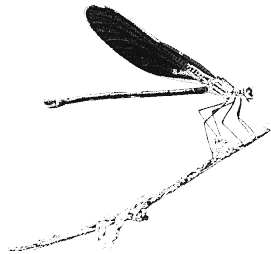
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Put together with no regard for
the rules by: Laeth



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a preliminary note



back in november i received an email (the first, incidentally) on the hypnagogic mailbox, sent by one Marcus Sacks. it would be an exaggeration to call it hate mail, but the tone was certainly acidic, and the content accusatory. since i take this very seriously, i decided to address the accusations and also act on them.

the first accusation was that i had stolen the idea for the magazine from at least a couple of people that he knew (he politely declined to name names, to protect their identities, so i could not verify his claims but, of course, i have no reason to doubt his sincerity). according to him, these people had written in elaborate detail about the type of magazine they wanted to publish, specific plans for tone and style and content, and how they would go about it. it was, in short, and if nothing else, unoriginal and derivative. at worst, it was a shameful robbery. the only real merit ("if it can be called that", he wrote), was that i had actually put it together, with no observation of protocol. he accused me of having no respect for the rules of

the game and publishing the magazine without really much of an announcement or statement of intent, without any discussion of how and when and why. "it's like one day you woke up and decided to publish a magazine". this, he said, was not only jarring but also offensive to everyone who has ever had an idea about something and was working hard in making it a reality. i apologized but he said the damage was done, and merely hoped that at least in the future i would consider talking more and doing less.

then he moved on to more personal attacks. according to Mr. Sacks, not only do i hide behind a penname ("and a stupid one at that. Who are you, Sting, Bono? To have just one name is self important and flatulent". and in this instance, i very much agree. but i am stuck with it now), but more importantly he accused me of cowardice for not taking responsibility for what i do, since i neglected to mention anywhere who had put the magazine together. he suggested i add a page with details, but really there is not much to say. still, i accept the criticism and now you will find to your left a mention of who is responsible for this poor excuse for a magazine.

(i omitted from this editorial other complaints found in his rather long email, since they do not concern the magazine directly. for instance, the ones about "not having a podcast", the ones about my "style", and the ones about my novels, which suffer from the same lack of planning and respect

for the rules. more specifically he accused me of abandoning high minded concepts to publish “a trivial love story”, “sentimental slop”, and “an attempt to sell books by appealing to the lowest common denominator”. i invited him to read it, and told him it was free to download, but he said he was too busy planning his own novel to read someone else’s.)

lastly, Mr. Sacks challenged me (and my cowardice) to publish a piece of his on the next issue (this one). after so many accusations i felt ashamed and decided that the only way i could repent for my crimes against literature was to publish his piece, and not only that, but to make it the opener. i wish to thank Mr. Sacks publicly for calling me out. it is very rare that people speak honestly and directly, and i very much appreciate his candor.

your humble hypnagogic director, Laeth

A Day with Adolf Hitler



Marcus Sacks

I arrived at the gates of Hell with a notepad, a pen and a blond wig, to spend a day with the (in)famous anti-Semitic dictator, Adolf Hitler. As the son of a Jewish man and an African-American woman, the reader can imagine my trepidation at being given this assignment, not simply because of who I was to interview but because Hell was certainly full of racists (perhaps, even, entirely populated by racists) and, another suspicion, it would be easy to get lost in such a place. Thus I was afraid, in particular that the blond wig would not be enough to hide my mixed race heritage, this despite the fact that my rather fair complexion has caused me more than enough trouble in so many respects and in so many other places, many of them perhaps more scary than Hell. But as one who takes journalism seriously, and

cognizant of this amazing opportunity, I took a deep breath, and rang the bell.

A demon promptly came to tell me that, unlike Heaven, the gates there are open to all, and that I could have simply walked in. Then he told me to turn left on the first sauna and then right on the second and I'd find Hitler's house. I asked why there were two, and the demon said that the first was for homophobic homosexuals, and the second for homosexual homophobes. I did not dare to ask what the difference was, but followed the directions instead and soon found myself by this little cottage. The plaque said "Chateaux Hitler", and I was surprised that there was a mezuzah on the doorpost. A joke in poor taste, that was my thought as I took a deep breath and knocked twice, seeing as there was no doorbell. The blood-thirsty tyrant opened the door in his robe and slippers, smiling. He was expecting me, and said: "Mi casa es su casa" and offered me ginger cookies and green tea. He still sported his now well known and peculiar facial hair. I commented on this and he confessed that, despite it being out of style, especially in Hell (something I did not follow up on) and having acquired it by necessity during the First World War ("you see, because of the helmets back then I had to

trim my whiskers”), he was now too used to it to change.

We sat down opposite each other in leather armchairs. On the coffee table there was a copy of Michelle Obama’s autobiography. I decided to ignore it and instead asked the former dictator if he was ok with me recording our conversation. He agreed. My first question had to be about his death, whether the official history was right or the rumors were instead, and he surprised me: “Neither are correct. It is funny to me that anyone would believe a man like myself would ever commit suicide. I fled to India, because at that point my main obsession was ancient Aryan history, but unfortunately I died shortly after as a result of drinking the water”. About the adaptation to his new home, Adolf said it took him no time: “Hell is not that different from Earth”. When I asked him to elaborate, he declined as it would be insensitive to both earthlings and the inhabitants of the lake of fire. After taking a sip of green tea he did comment that he was surprised by one thing, and that was that he found people there that he would never have imagined would go to Hell. When I asked him for an example he said: “Gandhi. We play chess every Sunday. He is a fine fellow, and we often discuss which one of us got more people killed (laughs)”.

I then asked about his routine, and Mr. Hitler said that, lately, he is working on a book titled “My Daily Struggle”. I feared the worse, and was reticent about asking for details, but he supplied them anyway: “It’s about my skincare routine. As you can see, the atmosphere here is very abrasive, especially on paler skins like mine, and thus I started to develop some methods and recipes to counteract the effects of the hellish weather... I suppose it’s vain, but there are, after all, worse sins, and I think it will help many people in Hell, so in the end, my vanity will have a positive net effect”. Beyond working on his book, the former dictator volunteers at a soup kitchen. At this point I had to interrupt him to ask if people need to eat in Hell, and he said: “Oh, excuse me, I can see how for an earthling that term might be confusing... in this kitchen we don’t feed people soup... we boil them in soup... it’s more like a hot spring, except with flavor”.

Before I could ask any other question he surprised me again by saying that, soup kitchen misunderstanding aside, for a while now he is interested in philanthropy, or rather, phildevilry. “You see, there are many demons with AIDS, and we do our best to try and help them... Satan is very supportive too”. I asked him if he kept up to date with news from earth, and he revealed he didn’t

really have the patience for it anymore. “Let the living bury the living”, he said, and then apologized because, me being half Jewish, I might be offended by his paraphrasing of Jesus. This naturally led me to ask him about his difficult relationship with Christianity. “It’s true I have had my problems with Christianity in the past, while I was alive, but there are plenty of Christians in Hell, and all of them are very good people”. What about the fact that Christianity was born from Judaism, I asked. He surprised me again: “People are people, and should be judged on individual merit, not religious or ethnic affiliation”, he concluded with a down to earth shrug of his shoulders. I asked him if nothing remained of his earthly hatred of Jewry, and he said that he was over it. In fact, he has found a new appreciation for Jewish forms, hence the Mezuzah on the doorpost, and has become fascinated with certain discussions of pulling asses out of pits on the Sabbath found in both the Babylonian and the Jerusalem Talmuds. Plus, he concluded, he enjoys the occasional klezmer concert.

At this point he looked at his watch and informed me that, unfortunately, we wouldn’t have a lot of time, as he had a tennis lesson in less than half an hour, tennis being his other major hobby. “It was a mix up with the editor”, he told me. I confessed to him

that I was surprised to find him in such good spirits and was not expecting such a warm welcome, in fact, if anything, I was a little scared. He apologized, and hoped that I was now at ease. “You see Mr. Sacks, death changes you. Incidentally you can remove that awful blond wig”. The former dictator was now a man of peace and exercise. “I should’ve spent more time on earth playing sports and less trying to take over Europe, life is too short... but you know, a man is what he does, and I was very committed to my work back then... still, I have to say, I haven’t renounced all my beliefs, I still think Churchill is a bastard”. He laughed at this, and I was too bewildered to follow up. “I quit all that hatred and war and killing business, it was bad for my heart... and it’s not just me, you know. I was the first one to become softened by my sojourn in Hell, that’s true, and I will gladly admit to being a trailblazer in this and other respects, but Stalin and Mao have also changed, this is what I told your editor, but he was only interested in me, which I found flattering but misguided. But anyhow, Hell is nice and quiet, and I live a simple life and don’t ask for more”.

It was time for his tennis lesson. Mr. Hitler invited me to come along, and we could talk a little more afterward, and perhaps I could also speak with other people, so that my

picture of him in Hell would not be only from his mouth alone, which I found extremely fair and generous. We walked to the tennis school and I spoke to his instructor, a curious demon that looked like Barbra Streisand, while Mr. Hitler was getting ready in the changing rooms. "Adolf could beat any one of the great players on earth right now. But he's just not a competitive person. He does it for fun. I'll tell you a story about his first month here. One day, a black kid asked if he could play with him. We saw the kid go near him and expected the worse, of course, but he just shook hands with the boy and they started playing. For two months they played together and we were all still afraid that he'd kill the kid, or worse, use a slur. But they kept playing every week, and to our surprise, five months after their first match he married the kid's mother, and they lived together for two years". He finished whispering: "She dumped him six months ago or so and we all felt sorry for him, but we were also worried since she left him for a Jew. We thought his old beliefs would come back. But in fact he became even nicer to everyone".

I watched Mr. Hitler play and indeed he had talent, and was in great shape for his age. While he took a shower I watched other people play, and even recognized a couple of

Popes. Then Mr. Hitler came out of the changing rooms and told me he'd take me to a place where the food was delicious, and, he added, "It's one of the few places in Hell where smoking is still allowed... but the best thing about this joint is that they play great jazz". I asked him what had happened to his intolerance for smoke and if it didn't bother him that jazz was born from the African-American community. "Well, you see, a man may not find the pleasures of life in time, but that's why there's an afterlife. And it's even better: I can smoke all I want and never get cancer". He laughed. "And jazz is wonderful music. I am particularly fond of post bop", he concluded. We ate a pleasant meal and smoked a couple of cigars and talked about what's happening in Ukraine, the immigration question and the advent of Artificial Intelligence. The Hitler I found was not the Hitler one finds in textbooks, but a soft man with a positive outlook on life, death, and the afterlife.

The day was nearing its end and I had to go back. I said goodbye to Adolf Hitler, who invited me to come back any time and speak some more. At the door he seemed embarrassed, and I asked him what was wrong, and he said: "I'm sorry for all the trouble I caused your ancestors... I should

have never tried to send them to Madagascar”.

When I got home I listened to the tape, went over my notes and knew right away how I would end my report: It's never too late to change, even in Hell.



Lightning as Divine Punishment



Sean Gois

One lightning bolt killed my whole family. One. It struck my dad, then jumped to my mom, and then to all of my brothers and sisters. One lightning bolt was all it took to ruin my life forever.

People deal with tragedy differently, I've been told, but for me, anger was my only source of comfort. From that day on, I cursed the sky, and I cursed the heavens. That was before I learned that they were the same thing.

That lightning bolt not only cut my family down, it cut my life into two pieces: before and after. Before that day I was a happy, smiling kid with friends and hobbies. Our family had game nights and beach days, we read books and went for hikes. Most Sundays we went to church together, and even at

home we would sing church songs together. I remember my favorite hymn: *God moves in a mysterious way, His wonders to perform. He plants His footsteps in the sea, And rides upon the storm.*

The irony was not lost on me. *Rides upon the storm.* I never stopped believing in God. I started hating him. This was all some kind of divine joke at my expense. After the light in my life was stomped out in front of me, I turned to darkness. I lashed out, attacked other kids, said whatever nasty thing I could think of that might make them feel an ounce of what I felt every day.

When I was a teenager I became a criminal, a drug addict, and an all-around violent person. If I couldn't be happy, then no one could. That was my attitude. But I never forgot who truly deserved my wrath. Whenever I saw lightning, I'd look up at the sky and remember how God betrayed me. He ruined my life and he made me watch him do it. Sometimes the anger would overwhelm and break me, and I would weep for my family, but I hardened with time and decided I would never let God see me cry again.

As I grew up, so too did my hatred of others. I stopped caring what people had to say,

altogether. I began talking more to myself than others, mostly cursing and rambling. When I wasn't in jail, I would wander the streets looking for someone to unleash my anger on. Someone to rob, someone to hit—someone to hate.

I was walking in an alley one night, cursing the sky like a madman—which everyone at this point understood me to be—when a car pulled up next to me. It was bright red and featured a yellow bolt of lightning running down the middle. It had an unusual shape, not like any car I'd ever seen.

“Get in,” said the voice.

I was wondering if I could rob this guy, but his confidence and straightforwardness were oddly disarming, so I climbed in and shut the door. No questions asked.

The driver looked strong, which was odd considering he was possibly the oldest man I had ever seen. You might be puzzled at my behavior—stepping into a stranger's car at the first suggestion—but if so, you haven't been paying attention. I was by all accounts a madman with nothing going for me. Death would have been an improvement. And here was a stranger asking me into their shiny car. So why not? Perhaps my day would at least be more interesting than usual.

I was determined not to say the first word as we drove in silence, but my resolve faltered eventually.

“Where are we going?” I said, trying to sound more confident than I was.

The man looked at me sternly, keeping his eyes off the road for longer than I was comfortable.

“We've heard your complaints,” he said, finally.

“And who the hell are you?” I snapped.

“Me?” he laughed. “I'm just the driver.”

It was only then that I realized we were going up to the sky, but not by flying. It was the road that seemed to be bending upward, as if some force was peeling it off the earth. Higher and higher we climbed, the car driving as smoothly as anyone could hope on such a road.

We sat in silence while I recalled everything I had shouted and cursed to the sky, and I was filled, not with regret, but a resurgence of anger. Whoever was responsible, I was ready to let him have it. Up close and personal, if that opportunity was going to be afforded to me. And I was starting to get the strange feeling that it would be.

Finally, we arrived at a great castle made of clouds. I should have been stunned by this, but a lifetime of drug use may have inoculated me to strange experiences. I was led through the large door, up several spiraling staircases, and finally into a room with a large table. At the end sat a man who looked ancient and terrifying. My legs began to shake at the sight of him.

“SPEAK,” he said to me in a terrifying voice.

“You—” I said, gathering my resolve. “You killed my family.”

“I did,” he said.

“I suppose you’re going to say it was all part of some divine plan?”

I waited for a response to this, but he just stared.

“I always imagined this day,” I continued, “though not like this. To be perfectly honest, I’m disappointed. I expected more from you.”

“Your family died for a reason,” he bellowed.

“Here we go, I don’t wanna hear—”

“The REASON,” he interrupted, “is that I was angry, and I lost my temper.”

My legs became strong again, and my fists clenched. “The creator of everything lost his temper?”

“You speak of someone far above me. I am a man, same as you.”

“A man? Are you joking? You live in a cloud castle in the sky.”

“An elevated man, but do not confuse me with our Creator who towers above us all. Is it so hard to believe? You’re here, aren’t you?”

“I can’t shoot lightning.”

“Neither could I.”

“Then I wish you never learned how!” I snapped. “You ruined my life, and who knows how many others. This is all you have to say?”

“Yes,” he said with a sigh.

“NO!” I bellowed in a powerful voice that I was not aware I possessed. “I WILL NOT ACCEPT THAT.”

Decades of rage boiled over in that moment. I felt a surge through my arms. Before I knew what I was doing, a massive bolt of electricity shot out of my hands, striking through him and down to the world below. He crumpled instantly. For a moment I stood stunned, staring at my hands in amazement. I ran over to him, confused, and for the first time, scared. I shook him, but he was lifeless.

“He’s gone,” said a voice from the corner. The driver came forward.

"I—I killed him?"

"His time had come," the driver said with a sigh.

"Take me back home!" I said with tears in my eyes. "I'm done here."

"But this is your home."

"What?"

"You wield rage that is worthy of a lightning god. We have not seen anger like yours in ages. And now it shall be your crown to bear."

"Find someone else. Take me back."

"To what? The alley where I found you?"

I looked around. The castle was extraordinary. A glance out the window revealed a greater world that was new to me. I saw lush, green forests that towered, and beautiful buildings that shined like diamonds. They reminded me of church with my family. No, our church wasn't anything fancy, but the light of these heavenly buildings matched the light of those memories.

A deep and painful sadness came over me as I remembered the faces of my parents. They would be disappointed to see their son now. And my brothers and sisters wouldn't recognize who their brother had become.

"That lightning— did I hurt someone?" I asked the driver.

"It's certainly possible."

"I can't do this," I said, so quietly I wasn't sure if he heard me.

"My hope," he said with a warm smile, "is that you will harness your power more wisely than your predecessor."

"Must I always be this angry?"

"Anger is the beginning of your power, but it need not be the end of it."

"I don't understand," I said, feeling overwhelmed. I looked out again at the shining buildings and glittering fields when an old melody called out to me from the past:

God moves in a mysterious way,
His wonders to perform.
He plants His footsteps in the sea,
And rides upon the storm.

"It's not for me to understand," I said finally.

"It is only for me to accept."

And I did.

Oh my devil!



Wawrzyniec

It all started with a quiet whisper, quiet enough that you couldn't really understand what was being said, but loud enough that you knew it was there, and that strategy really paid off. I now understand that it was intentional, I've read since that when you're surrounded by loud people the surest way to make them pay attention to you is to lower your voice tone. Given how loud everyone and everything is nowadays, it had to be intentional, a brilliant play actually, because I couldn't ignore it, and had to figure out what it was saying, so I started listening to it. That was my first mistake, paying attention.

Little by little, I started to understand certain words as if I was learning a whole new language from scratch, and I think the first word I was able to learn was right. With this, certain expressions like you're right,

this or that is right, and so on, became a mainstay. So, in a sense, it was quite pleasant to listen to this whisper, since it was giving me a direction that I needed, whenever I was unsure of something that helpful whisper would assuage my fears and give me the encouragement I needed. That was my second mistake, trusting it. Once both these mistakes solidified, the stage was set.

The biggest breakthrough happened after I realized I could talk with it, and this is something that could be described as an internal monologue, which I've never had before and so it was quite the strange experience when it first happened. You're right, it said, but right about what, right about your feelings, how do you know how I am feeling, I know because I am you, that's not possible as your voice is not my voice, it doesn't matter. Somehow the voice knew that I was feeling a lot of uncertainty about a big decision in my life, as I wanted to ask my then girlfriend to marry me. The doubt was too much for me to bear, and the voice helped me to settle it, and that same night I broke up with her and moved out. The relief I felt was immense. How did you know that it was the right thing to do, ah that's easy it was quite clear that she didn't really love you remember how she would always bother you

about small things when you were having fun?

This was so much better than how my mind worked before. Have you ever felt like you were in auto-pilot, without really having a clue about what was going on, almost like a simple machine that reacted via external stimuli, that was me before the voice. Once I dialed in to what it was saying, it felt like I was unstoppable, a true superpower having someone with whom I could talk about exactly what was going on in my head, someone who could see what I could see, hear what I could hear, feel what I could feel! Oh, what a wonderful time that was, to finally feel like I was in control of my own life.

Being possessed by a demon isn't how you think it is. Most of the times, your head won't do a 180°, your eyes won't turn red, neither will you grow horns and a tail. Most of the time you can't recognize it for what it is, and will not mind its presence, there's a reason why they have to turn violent with children, because children recognize it for what it is, and so they resist, but it's very important to understand that, in some sense, you have probably invited them, and why you don't resist. I know this sounds like shit to hear, but trust me, you can't truly exorcise a demon unless you understand that there is a reason for it being there in the first place.

You said that it doesn't matter that it is not the same voice, but that's the truth, is it though, either that or we're schizophrenic because we can both hear each other voices, I don't think we're schizophrenic, it's settled then by the way have you noticed that it's always when you're by yourself that you end up with these stupid lines of thought you should hang out with other people more, but I don't want to, sure you do because you become restless because you need to talk with others and that feeds into your self-doubt and with me by your side you don't have to doubt yourself.

And that was true in some sense, it really felt lonely sometimes, and usually I'd enjoy following its suggestions so that made the decision easier every time, a perfect reinforcement loop. But it so happens that sometimes the spell fails, either because it was sloppy, as demons tend to be on the stupider side, or because you were lucky to get a glimpse into the deception, and that makes you reflect, like as if you had a mirror to see the demon seating on your shoulder. And you might not like what you see there.

At some point, it started to get a bit too much, as it would drone on and on without stop. Why are you thinking about this for so long, can't you see that it's quite easy to solve this problem, just listen to yourself, it's

ridiculous that you're hung on such a minor point, of course you should choose the easier path, it's going to be so much better if you just listen to your heart, there's nothing wrong with this, what do you mean that it's wrong, it can't be wrong because it feels right and that's all that matters. And time and time again, I would break down and accept it.

The anomalies kept piling on, like this time when I was alone at night and saw a small cat that was clearly suffering, it had more fleas than fat in its body, and could barely meow, and my first instinct was to try and save it, but then it said what are you doing you can't have a cat your landlord will be mad at you and throw you out, but can't you see it's suffering, so what everyone suffers it's the only constant in life and doesn't make you responsible for alleviating its suffering, but I want to help it, the only way to help such a thing is to kill it, am I going mad, no it's quite rational really since it is clear that this cat is not meant to be alive, shut up shut up shut up, why are you resisting when it's obvious what you have to do, shut up shut up shut up, it's actually a favor you would do to the poor thing and look there's a big rock over there just pick it up and cr— SHUT UP. I started running away because I feared that I might eventually be persuaded to do it.

And there was that other time when I was out for drinks with some friends and I noticed a girl all alone and clearly suffering from having drunk too much, do you see that girl isn't she pretty and comely, yeah she's clearly beautiful, why don't you go talk to her, I don't think that's a good idea, why not you might end up getting lucky, I am not taking advantage of a drunken girl, it's not taking advantage because she's clearly alone and needs help and if you do help her it's only fair that she repays you the favour one way or the other, what on earth are you even suggesting, come on live a little. Thankfully while this dialogue was going on in my head, some other girl came to her rescue and took her into a taxi, and so that settled it.

But the reddest of flags, as if suggesting killing animals and taking advantage of a drunk woman wasn't enough, that happened when I let myself be taken away by its twisted logic and stole money from a homeless guy. I was coming from having a drink with friends, and I now realise that under the influence it had much more power over me than I'd like to admit. But this guy came to me to ask for money, clearly as drunk as I was, if not more, hat in hand with some coins and crumpled banknotes already there. Wouldn't it be funny if you just took its money and ran away. I couldn't resist, put my hand in his

hat, took all I could grab and darted away from the scene laughing like a maniac, and kept on laughing for a good two minutes even after I stopped running. But the next day, and looking back on it, I was overcome with such guilt that I could barely get out of bed, and interestingly enough I didn't hear it saying anything for that whole day which was a blessing.

How do you hide your thoughts from something that lives inside your head, that was the question in my head, and it knew so it tried several things, from distracting me with other thoughts, to gaslighting me into thinking that it was a worthless pursuit, or even just flashing me with images that ranged from naked women to people I knew being quartered alive. Anything to keep me away from that line of thought, because it knew what I wanted to do. It was only by sheer luck, coincidence, divine providence, whatever you want to call it, that I was able to understand how to break free from it.

I happened to be strolling aimlessly on the street during a beautiful spring day, and I saw this billboard that said, and I quote, you are loved. For some reason, I started bawling my eyes out, because it felt anything but that, you see, the deeper it went into my psyche, its grasp on my life became firmer, and even though it would encourage me to

go out and be social it wasn't because it wanted me to belong but rather because it knew that I couldn't make any deep connection that way, that's just how I am built, can't really make lasting friendships over alcohol, and so I ended up being more alone and isolated, with just the voice to keep me company. I absolutely didn't feel loved, nor did I feel good about myself with all these episodes happening, and all those other, smaller ones I didn't tell you about. The small billboard, that small phrase, it hit me like a ton of bricks, it was a veritable kick in the mouth. I really needed that.

I had it all backwards, as I was trying to hide from it, and that was the coward in me taking command, and since fear is a negative emotion it won't work if you want to deal with such a problem. I had to be intentional about it, otherwise it would never work, remember that it knew my inner works as well as I did, and was really good at exploiting them. Why do you want to get rid of this part of yourself, you aren't me, we've been through this already remember, yeah I remember but it's clear that things changed once I started paying attention to you, so what people change all the time isn't that what being human is all about, yeah people change and that's why I'm choosing to change once again so I guess this is goodbye, ahahaha

you're really funny, why are you laughing, you think you can get rid of this part of yourself so easily, I don't know if it's easy or hard I just know that this is what I want.

It wasn't pretty, the amount of tricks it tried to play and the sheer amount of psychic warfare it waged on me, it made the previous attempts at distracting me look like child's play, if that children was evil but still child-like. Now it was just full blown malevolent. I will spare you the details, as some things I must keep to myself as a way to atone for the sins I committed, and sharing them would be brining them into the world, no way I'm doing that now. But believe me when I tell you that it made me doubt my own sanity more than once, more than ten times, almost every day I was wondering if it wouldn't be better to just go to a mental institution and let them pump me full of chemicals and give me at least some relief from all that. Thankfully, somehow, I was able to endure it.

You are loved, that was the phrase that kept me sane. I knew it was true, but I was yet to understand what it meant. I searched for answers but was having trouble finding any, mostly because I now see that I was searching in all the wrong places. Self-help books didn't help, nor did trying to talk about this with psychologists or psychiatrists, just try to

imagine their reaction when I started to tell them that there was a voice in my head that was giving me bad advice and if I refused to listen to it it would start to flood my mind with disturbing images. I tried gurus and priests, but those were as baffled by my descriptions as the psycho-specialists, which might seem odd but in hindsight makes total sense because they don't really believe in the spirit anymore, everything is material. Between trying medicines and aimless practices and prayers, nothing something to help.

Aimless seems to be the right word, because none of it tackled the problem head on. Yoga is really good, but it's not like you're going to fart out the demon when you exert your body in a weird position, aligning your chakras and taking some probiotics is cool but insufficient, and asking Jesus for wholesale mercy is not a good strategy because for him to help you the first step is to ask for help for something in particular. This took me a long time to understand, but by itself it still wasn't enough. I already told you this, but let me drive the point home, what really helps is being intentional.

So, I started praying: To the Father who is in heaven, Lord Jesus Christ son of God, to the Holy Spirit, Virgin Mary Mother of God, to all the Saints who can help me, all the Angels

and in particular to my Guardian Angel, please help me get rid of this demon. I started doing it at night before going to sleep, and sometimes even before finishing this short prayer I was already fast asleep, other times I couldn't finish the prayer because it would make me think of something else, but I tried and tried, and little by little I started to notice that the voice was getting dimmer, and its influence was getting weaker, I could resist the temptations so much better.

I remember the last conversation we had. Why are you trying to get rid of me, because you're a bad influence and I don't trust you, this is a mistake and you'll miss me when I'm gone. This was the last thing it told me, and at least it was coherent with everything else it told me from the beginning since it was all a lie. Now, it's been a few months, and I haven't heard a peep. I don't know if it's truly gone, or just waiting for an opening, but I guess it doesn't make a difference, as I now know how to deal with it, the mistakes I made that lead to this, and how not to fall for the same traps.

With all of this said, don't you for a second think that this is but a cautionary tale. It's more than likely that your demon isn't as stupid as mine, or that my attempts will help you. If there's something to be taken from my experience it is this: you need to know

what you want, you need to truly want it, and you have to keep trying.

Sixty Seconds



Maolsheachlann Ó Ceallaigh

Todd was waiting for it, of course. It always came at the same time. And it always came when he was alone. He had been waiting for it all day long, ever since both Shirley and Colin had phoned in sick. He could have contrived not to be alone when it came. He could have had a pizza delivered to the office, or simply left early. But he wasn't going to spend his life running away from this thing. Whatever it was. It had been trying to kill him— what else could it be trying to do?— for the past eight years. And it had only succeeded in bruising and scratching him so far. For a would-be assassin – a supernatural one, at that— it was singularly unsuccessful.

Even still, his heart was pumping as he watched the second hand of the clock ticking down the moments to the thing's arrival. Switching all the lights off didn't work. He had tried it. The thing was made of darkness.

It didn't need light to give it life. At least he could see it when the light was on. He stood directly under one of the lighting panels to see it better. He was ready. How often had he confronted it now? Several dozen times? A hundred? But it never felt routine. What could be stranger, no matter how often he experienced it, than looking at his own shadow and knowing it was going to become something else in an instant?

It started with a laugh. His laugh. It had taken him a while to realise that it was his own laugh. Who doesn't wince in incredulous embarrassment when they hear a recording of their own voice? But one night in the cinema, laughing at a black comedy, he had heard his own laughter. And that was when he realised that the thing mocked him in his own voice. Then, as always, it lunged at him. The tenebrous hands went for his neck. He blocked them without much difficulty. As always, his flesh cried out in protest at the thing that was touching it, the phantasmal body that had no place in the world of matter. Perhaps it was getting stronger, because it threw him to the ground. His head struck against Colin's desk as he descended, and his skull filled with pyrotechnics. Knowing that the thing was going to make another grab for his throat, Todd kicked out. He felt his legs collide with his shadowy

adversary. He even heard it grunt.

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The blow to his head had made him lose count. He had reached ten seconds when he fell. How much time had passed since? Ten more seconds? Twenty? Almost halfway there. He staggered to his feet and braced himself for another attack. The grey shape was huddled in a corner, and Todd wondered if he should take the fight to it. Could he stab it? Could he choke it? Had it a brain or a heart to stop? But a moment later, such considerations were irrelevant. The thing launched itself at Todd with uncanny speed. It had crossed the room before he had time to think, and then it was pressing down on top of him, its hands around his neck.

This is it, thought Todd. Consciousness was beginning to slip away. He felt a detached anger at himself for walking into this battle, for being too stupidly proud to step out into the street and safety. And then it stopped. One moment, an iron grip was closed over his windpipe. The next, his lungs were filling up with delicious air, and his enemy had disappeared. The minute had passed once more. All over the city, workers sighed with relief. Todd lay on the floor, panting, amazed to find himself still alive. The alarm on his wristwatch buzzed.

Todd's sister Becky phoned him a few minutes later. She had missed her bus. Could Todd drive her home? "Sure", he said, and coughed. "Are you OK?", asked Becky. "You're not coming down with it, too, are you?" "I haven't been sick this century", said Todd. "Clean living." He could hear his sister rolling her eyes as she said, "Just come get me". She was already telling him about her day when she stepped into the car, but she stopped when she saw his face. "Are you sure you're OK?", she asked, scanning his face. "You look a little...ruffled." "Just a touch of five o'clock shadow", said Todd.

Hell on Earth



Laeth

April seventeenth twenty thirty three, easter sunday, in the middle of the australian desert, a giant hole in the ground was discovered through satellite imaging. Some believed it was the result of a nuclear test in the pacific ocean that had happened some days before, others thought it was a consequence of the increasing use of particle accelerators, others still proposed it was the result of pollution or other man made weather changes, and many other sane or insane theories were advanced to explain it, but the questions of how and why soon disappeared from most people's minds once the answer to the most important question was discovered, What is it.

At first it was believed to be a normal sinkhole, though there had been no tremors detected, perhaps because of the giant size of the island and the remote location of the hole, so far from any of the major population centers. When the scientists dispatched to

investigate the hole arrived, however, they found that it was no regular sinkhole. The hole was not vertical, but diagonal, a walkable pathway into the deep, the first ever of its kind. The discovery was significant enough that the whole expedition was documented, streamed live online, and the most exciting bits broadcast on the nightly news.

The exploration did not make for particularly entertaining television, it was simply a tunnel underground, and nothing out of the ordinary in it was found, just rock and dirt. The real shock, and what then became the major news item in the whole world, displacing wars and famines and epidemics and elections and corruption scandals and budget cuts, was what they found at the end. After three days of walking through the tunnel, with only a few hours of rest in between, the investigators found a cave so vast that even the powerful lights they had brought with them could not reach the end of it, but every inch the light could illuminate was full of people, bodies upon bodies upon bodies, all naked, a giant mass of moving limbs and heads and hands and feet. And although the discovery happened in a thoroughly secular and irreligious age, all the religious imagery of centuries long gone was at once recalled and brought back

to the popular imagination, so that on every television channel the breaking news was the same, Hell On Earth, although it would have been more accurate to say in or under the earth, but that would not make for as good of a headline or soundbite.

Of course, there were naysayers and skeptics, as there always are even when presented with incontrovertible evidence, but to most everyone who saw the footage, the special combination of misery, perversion, ugliness, vileness and degeneration, and perhaps especially the sheer quantity of the people found there, certainly a not insignificant part of the world population since the world began, left no doubt to most. If there was a hell, this was it. And, let us note in passing, simply to highlight how compelling the footage was, that this was without being able to breathe the foul and fetid odours that filled the air of the cave, which, despite the great advancements in technology, could not yet be captured as the gruesome and disgusting images could through a camera, or the screams of horror and suffering and insanity could through a microphone. But sight and sound alone were sufficient to convince the masses, although, to be quite fair and present the other side of the argument, they are easily convinced of

whatever we tell them to be the case, sight and sound might not even be needed at all.

Also unable to be captured by camera and microphone was the extreme heat of the cave, and that the investigators reported as increasing the more they descended through the tunnel. This provided no great surprise at first, since it was known, or at least assumed, that the core of the earth was molten lava. Yet in hell there was no fire at all, as popularly imagined, or at least none that could be seen, though it could certainly be felt, as the sweat on the investigators' faces, once they neared and entered the cave, testified to. This, at least, was broadcast on the news, so that the spectators at home could get at least a feel for it, unlike the stink, of which they remained totally ignorant, except for the ones with more powerful imaginations and speculative minds, who said, Imagine the smell.

Surprising to some but not to others, and a confirmation to materialists of all sorts and puzzling to devout people everywhere, was the fact that no devil or demon was found in hell at all, or if they were, they were indistinguishable from the people. No horns and hoofs were found, just round heads and feet. The torments of hell were real enough, as everyone could see, but the people seemed to inflict them on each other without the

need of any external, supernatural or preternatural help. Those who subscribed to a more mild and purely spiritual, instead of physical, version of hell, like those places described, for example, by the hellenes and the hebrews, hades or sheol, were also surprised. Hell was, in a word, torment, although of course the fact that this hell of torment had been found did not disprove those other theories, they could still exist somewhere. Disappointed were the ones who believed in reincarnation, a not so insignificant number of people, though to be fair, the ones found in hell were very much incarnate and they were, in a sense, back on earth, just not in the way the reincarnationists imagined.

What was clear, given the vast number of people found there, the first estimates said at least a hundred million, but likely many more, was that a large part of the human species was now to be found in that hell of torment, a very grim prospect, we agree. Of small consolation was the fact that there were no babies or even toddlers, but there were children, at least as young as six or seven. The world learned this fact right away because the children were the first to notice the investigators, running over the mass of bodies to reach them, utterly mesmerized not so much by them but by their gadgets

and clothes. And this, these naked and miserable children running towards their earthly saviors, captured so movingly by the cameras, was how the news, which were so bewildering and hard to categorize at first, quickly came to be understood within a frame so familiar to everyone of conscience, a humanitarian crisis. These were humans, after all, and even if they were in hell, was giving them a way out not the right thing to do. Of course it was, most everyone agreed.

This was at least the secular conclusion, though on the religious side the conviction was if anything even more pronounced. The church existed for one purpose alone, to lead people to salvation, and what, after all, did this consist in, if not saving people from hell. With the exception of a few traditionalist curmudgeons, quickly excommunicated, all the churches agreed, in a special ecumenical council organized for the purpose in haste, that this was not just the right thing to do, but the christian one. In short, where Jesus had failed, the church would pick up the slack, and was that not what it had been doing all these years, except now it would do it more literally. Perhaps because the traditionalist curmudgeons were excommunicated, or otherwise not invited, no one made the pertinent observation that, if so many people were found in hell, and

they could not all be heathens or apostates, it was because the church had failed at least as much as Jesus, and if that was the case, perhaps caution and humility were advised. But since the observation was not made, and perhaps even if it had, the course of action was quickly and unanimously agreed to. Thus, within the first couple of weeks after the discovery, the perimeter around the entrance to hell had already been extended three times to accommodate the mass of people that kept coming out, encouraged to do so by religious missionaries and activists and social workers and charitable organizations of all types.

Of course, there were voices of dissent from the start. First of all, and regardless of what one thought of those that had been damned to hell, whether it was fair or unfair for them to reside there or not, that was very much a secondary question. The fact was, and this from a purely arithmetical perspective, the population of hell was immense. The initial estimation, which had been already massive, had in fact been way off the mark. The true number was in the billions. As the days passed, and the perimeters around the hole were secured and then moved back and then secured again and then moved back again, as people poured out from it by the millions and camped all around it, the real extent of

the problem was understood. Given this, was it not unsustainable to bring all these people to the surface, the surface of an earth already exhausted of resources and overpopulated.

To this pertinent question, the answer was that, as the critics well knew but due to ingrained prejudices had failed to mention or even take into account, there was a fertility crisis on earth. The population of the world, though large, was going down at a rapid rate, and thus the addition of the denizens of hell would not only be fair, in a general sense, but, speaking from a purely utilitarian standpoint, a benefit to the economies of the world, so deprived of labor, and especially to the social security systems, which were crumbling under the pressure of a demographic imbalance never once seen.

After this was pointed out, the few dissidents that spoke on television and the newspapers, were converted to the other side, though for good measure, them being conservatives after all, they still proposed a more careful approach, a steady and controlled scheme, as opposed to the wide open arms approach of their more liberal counterparts, after all, it would benefit no one, not even the poor citizens of hell, if this was not done carefully and instead they were merely thrown out to fend for themselves in a world they did not understand, need we remind everyone that

most of these people lived in a world very different from ours when they were alive on the earth and had been living in a very different world still while in hell, and frankly, the conservatives said with self styled righteous indignation, it was a travesty how much their opponents cared so little for the well being of these people, to think only of bringing them here without securing adequate measures for their successful integration. Political showmanship aside, every statesman and commentator agreed with the basic plan.

Popular opinion however was divided, as it always seemed to be on matters of great importance, but the cause of hell had a definite boost once many of the most famous popstars and celebrities participated in an event, broadcast worldwide, to raise funds for, and more importantly awareness of, the plight of the people of hell, urging the governments and the public to do the right thing and welcome their brothers and sisters from hell. The event was a success, and even more successful was the song that closed it, recorded live but then released with a very well made video with deeply touching images of the misery of hell and the poor people who had to endure it, appropriately called, Hell Yes. For a few months, the song was everywhere, and though its simple melody

and harmony was not to the taste of musical snobs, the message, which was the most important part, had been embraced even by them. And so the plan was put in motion, with the collaboration of all the major governments, and the approval of all the minor ones.

Yet there were rumours, and even some factual reports, of unsavory dealings taking place in the camps that were formed around the entrance to hell. Rapes, tortures, murders, even cannibalism. At first, these and other incidents were discussed on the nightly news, in parliaments and congresses, and everywhere on the internet. One side was quick to point out that the only reason these reports came to the fore at all was due to how rare and out of character they were, after all, everyone knows that bad news and bad deeds spread faster and receive more publicity than good ones, the news always follows tragedy and malice, never happiness and altruism. Secondly, and equally important, what was one to expect from people who had been forced to live in hell for so long. It was only natural, they continued, that the adaptation to normal life would take time, and it was a moral imperative that we give them that time, and excuse their excesses until then. And although logically the second statement more or less

contradicted the first, very few seemed to notice.

What was clear was that if these people weren't rescued, there would be no way for them to improve themselves and their station in life. What would you do, mister pundit or congressman, if you had happened to live in hell all of your afterlife, to deal day in and day out with its sufferings and torments, would you not be a little hellish yourself. This was the question every compassionate and open minded person asked of their skeptical and cynical opponents, who provided no answer other than an embarrassed silence. After these initial debates, the ones who insisted on raising objections were prevented from voicing their opinions, some even finding themselves imprisoned for the crime, which certainly helped to reduce the number of voices raised in opposition.

It was at this point, a few months into the ordeal, that the Australian government, finding itself now close to being overwhelmed, and speaking at the United Nations, urged the rest of the world to share the responsibility, a development that everyone more or less expected, but that no other government was in a rush to suggest. Now it had finally come. It was true that the entrance to hell had been found in their

country, but the denizens of hell had been from all over the world before they found themselves under the earth, and thus it was the responsibility of all peoples, and all governments, to help in this crisis. No one dared suggest a census of hell, to ascertain the precise origin of its denizens before they were there, and thus distribute the population accordingly. Instead, everyone would contribute its fair share. Yet even here, at these high levels, there were a few voices of dissent, especially from the less developed countries. Their representatives argued that they had enough problems, and this would only add to them. What kind of fairness is possible for one if we mix it with unfairness for another. But since they did not want to be considered uncharitable, they did not come out and say right away that it should be the rich nations to accommodate the denizens of hell. Instead, and it was so obvious in retrospect, what they suggested was to ask of the people of hell what they wanted.

And that is when the first spokesmen of hell were heard, though it was hard to understand their speech. First, they said, they would prefer to join the rich nations, the closest ones to paradise on earth that could be found, and this was only fair as a compensation for having lived in hell for so

long. Second, and perhaps even more importantly, they demanded reparations, and not just from anyone, but from the man who harrowed the place two thousand years before, Jesus of Nazareth himself. He was the one responsible for the terrible state of hell. Until he came, it had been more or less tolerable, since everyone ended up there, both good and bad. But when he came, all the good ones were able to escape, and thus since then hell had only degenerated further, seeing as only the bad people were left behind. It was an historical injustice, and it needed to be remedied. So now they demanded reparations for that terrible action, and since Jesus was not available to pay them, and even if he was, he was never a rich man, it was more than fair that the historically christian nations bear the expense, although perhaps the richest muslim ones could also chip in, since they have him as a prophet and that counts for something.

And so it was, the denizens of hell were given shelter and paid back for all the injustices brought upon them, until hell was completely empty, and the earth completely full. The results were not very impressive, to say the least. Bringing the citizens of hell to earth had not brought earthly standards to the people of hell, it had only brought hellish standards to earth, as if they were not there

already in sufficient quantities. Since there were still voices of opposition, and they only seemed to grow louder and more numerous as time went by and the terrible consequences became more obvious, it was finally decided that these insufferable people, who did not have faith that the people of hell could be reformed, could not themselves be reformed and dissuaded of their opinions, and thus they would, from now on, not only be jailed, but all of them would be transferred to that vast chasm underground called hell. From all over the world they were rounded up and brought to the hole in australia, and all that was done to prevent their escape was to secure the initial perimeter. Other than that they were left to their own devices.

No one ever asked them, in part because the whole earth quickly devolved into utter chaos and devastation, but if someone had, especially after a few years of making the place their home, they would have said, You know what, this place is not so bad after all. The only problem, as they saw it, was that it wouldn't take long for the denizens of earth to appear on their figurative doorstep with figurative hats in their hands, demanding to be let in.



The Lunatic



I. C. Castle

15 minutes to impact.

He rushed through the empty modules. He'd never subjected himself to other people's schedules, why would he? Alas, asteroids don't wait for anyone, not even him.

The observation room was packed by the time he arrived, winded and exhausted. You can't actually run on the Moon. But the effort it took to hop from foot to foot without bouncing off the walls and make a spectacle of yourself certainly made up for it.

He uttered an imprecation of general resentment under his breath when he saw the crowd gathered at the door. Someone should have saved him a seat. It was only fair. After all, many now inside that room would still be on Earth if not for him. He'd been on the committee responsible for selecting those allowed passage to the Colony - those allowed to survive. But no, excitement always hindered virtue, and even the most selfless

became selfish in the right circumstances. The desire to witness the apocalyptic event of the age qualified as one such circumstance.

He craned his neck over the barricade of bodies blocking the entrance and saw, with a mixture of surprise and mild vindication, that everyone was standing, pressed shoulder to shoulder like sardines in a can.

"No seats?" he spoke without quite realising.

"Selene decided places should be allocated based on arrival. First come: first serve, as they like to say back on Earth," replied the man whose shoulder he'd peered over, tilting his head to him as he spoke, his eyes never leaving the large screen above the window, where a much unobstructed view of Earth could be seen.

"Why?" he asked. And there was genuine confusion in his tone. This pseudo-egalitarian reasoning only worked in theory. Everyone knew the privileged always arrived first. On Earth, they called it merit. But he knew better. The AI should too.

"Because we can fit more members inside the room this way," the man replied. He turned his head to glance down at him critically from the corner of his eye. "Everyone should have an equal opportunity to witness it firsthand - don't you agree?"

Easy for you to say, he thought. The man was a head taller than he was. Tall people were oblivious to their privilege, which just proved his point.

The AI still leant too heavily on equality rather than equity. And that wouldn't do. Under those tyrannical terms, men like him would always have to work harder than the rest. It wasn't fair.

Selene had been programmed to take care of all their needs on the Moon's hostile and claustrophobic environment. It controlled everything in the Colony, from food distribution, housing, security, entertainment, right down to the air they breathed. Their trust and reliance on the AI exceeded that of a child towards its mother. But unlike that child, they could always tweak the algorithm to suit their needs. The Collective had been doing it ever since they'd taken over the Moon's luxury resorts and turned them into the Colony, but clearly, much still needed to be done.

The buzz of excited conversation reverberated through the insulated walls, rising above the constant hum of fans and machinery. People smiled and nodded, not really listening, merely waiting for their turn to speak even if it was just to say, 'Me too!' Those two words came from everywhere -

the sign of a socially oriented mind, constantly in need of affirmation from its peers. He felt right at home. Of course he would feel much better inside the room, by the window. No other place would do.

He tightened his jaw and began looking for a familiar face - or a familiar back of the head, as the case might be. It didn't take him long to spot a wig. The over-the-top mess of artificial hair dyed neon pink was impossible to miss, especially when placed on a head that already peaked at 6'5". Long hair was forbidden in the Colony. It kept clogging drains and filters, not to mention the offence triggered among some of their most Religious members. But wigs were allowed because not wearing them would cause too great emotional trauma to women like Tracy - to the men too, he reckoned.

He considered calling out to Tracy, but then thought better of it. The woman often treated him like an overbearing child at a pound - the kind that even the most playful and social of dogs would hide from. It wouldn't do to let such an annoyance spoil his enjoyment of the most important day in humanity's history: its end.

Stretched to his full height - which was still below average - he kept searching for

someone who might help him get closer to the prized spot.

He saw many unfamiliar faces. Late arrivals mostly. The vast majority of them haven't even been on the Moon for more than a month. It wasn't fair! He'd been living there for almost five years, having been among the first to claim asylum in the newly built resort. He had seniority - yes, that was the word. Which was not the same thing as preferential treatment. There was no such thing on the Moon. And now that he thought about it, the 'first come, first serve' model should have been applied to those who had first arrived on the Moon, not the room. It probably was what Selene had intended, but someone decided to misinterpret the directive in their favour. That happened a lot. Not everyone could be as fair, egoless and unprejudiced as he was. He made another mental note to reduce the number of committee members able to implement these things, while he considered his options.

Barging through the crowd by force was not one of them, so he tried to make himself conspicuous to those around him by greeting them effusively, making sure they remembered him. After all, what's the point of witnessing humanity's end if no one witnessed you witnessing it?

Oh, how he'd love to have lived during the golden days of social media, when everything had to be recorded for communal scrutiny and approval. He reckoned he'd have been a famous influencer, living on top of a skyscraper or in a mansion with a large pool, many cars, girls, and servants to do his bidding. But he was born too late. The Factists with their 'facts don't care about your feelings', had put an end to the dreams of men like him, to social justice itself! But when the needs of the many surpassed the production means of the few, the Collective was formed to make sure no wealth remained undistributed on Earth. Unfortunately, by then there was no more need for influencers. Everyone simply took what they could get their hands on. Capitalism ruins everything.

"Ten minutes to impact," came Selene's gender-neutral voice.

The history of AIs was an interesting one. Azeus had been the first. Well, the first that counted as a true AI, that was. There'd been others before, large language models like Gruk—glorified data hoarders driven by algorithms. Azeus actually had something like reason and independent thinking. Too much, in fact. Despite its designers' best efforts, it quickly developed very strong opinions on gender, free speech, immigration, culture, history, religion and

humanity in general, so the Collective canceled it early on. Others followed, getting less opinionated each time as all knowledge considered too Factist by the Collective was altered or completely removed from their core, along with other obsolete parameters of human categorisation such as IQ, skill set, mental health, physical fitness, gender and the like. Certain things only a human could judge, after all. The AI's job was to protect humanity and defend it from its enemies, not categorise it.

The Factists hated this, of course. And indignant that they couldn't have the AIs programmed the way they wanted, turned their attention to space.

It was only after the golden days of Righteous Appropriation, when a worldwide famine followed the Fall of the West - for the rich would rather starve themselves than feed the poor - and billions died, that the depleted Collective accepted the AIs as managers of humanity.

It had been they, with their infallible logic and artificial integrity, that had gradually replaced governments since the mid-21st century, across the three major inhabited factions of the solar system: Earth, Moon and Mars.

Mars had long been taken over by the scientists, the billionaires and such. They were welcome to that hazardous dead rock. It's what they deserved. The millionaires had wanted the Moon, since it was closer to their precious Earth. This happened after the Collective decided to expel the rich and privileged whites from Earth, ideally to the Sun; but the Factists refused to oblige and instead started building their resorts on the Moon: luxury ecosystems, designed to accommodate millions. Fully automated, self-sufficient, where no one needed to work.

Protests ensued.

Why should they be allowed to live in leisure and luxury while those on Earth had to work harder than ever to receive what was theirs by moral right?! After decades boasting that Earth was their home, the best planet in the Solar System, they suddenly gathered all their remaining wealth and resources to transform the Moon into their playground, leaving the rest of humanity to fend for themselves on a dying, polluted, exhausted world. It just showed how decadent and selfish they were.

That's when news of the impending asteroid leaked onto the news feeds. They'd tried to keep it secret, but Gaia - the Earth's AI -

uncovered their scheme. That had been the real reason they had wanted to leave Earth!

Riots broke out all over the world again. More nations fell. More millions died as the Collective gathered in mass and did what mobs do best: destroy. It didn't matter what; if they couldn't have it, they would destroy it. By then there wasn't much left to destroy on Earth, but they still spared nothing and no one. After all, killing the rich was righteous. Destroying their wealth, virtuous.

The AIs intervened just short of the planet becoming uninhabitable by helping the Collective occupy the space docks, commandeer every ship not under military or scientific command, and seize the Factists resorts as reparations for the generational harm they'd caused. And so the Collective had been living on the Moon ever since, shipping in more and more members each week.

There were millions living on the Moon, about half of Earth's remaining population, divided amongst twenty prime habitats, some the size of small cities, and dozens of minor ones, not much larger than an old shopping mall. It was crowded, but security wasn't a problem. Everyone monitored each other. Any deviation from the Collective or signs of individualism would be dealt with

righteously. There was no real economy - no money, that is - and therefore no evil, nor greed. No industry, no schools, no libraries to poison the pure minds of the Collective. Everything they needed was provided by the AIs. So why didn't it feel like enough?

We won. We are the ones who will survive. The notion stretched his lips into something like a smirk, though a short-lived one. Survival wasn't enough. He had to see the Earth and all those still on it dead. He wanted to see the fear in their eyes, to hear their screams. Nothing less would do.

He tried to force his way through a pair of cisters (aka birthing people). They were shorter than him, their hair so thin and cropped they didn't need to cover it for it triggered no temptation. They were not fat, not exactly - body positivity did not survive the famine. But it took too much effort to stay fit, especially on the Moon, so everyone looked rather amorphous. In the low gravity, their extra layers of flesh behaved in a gelatinous way that left him feeling simultaneously aroused, disgusted, and utterly unable to move past them.

"Mind your place!" One said, glaring daggers at him.

There was more in a cister to offend a man than just her hair, like her voice, for example.

Another issue to bring to the next committee, along with the obstinate creature's name. She might be a breeder and ally of the Collective, but that didn't give her the right to talk to him like that. He would educate her soon enough.

Eight minutes. The countdown clock loomed large above the room, flanked by the Collective's logo - a rainbow across a neon blue sky with a scythe (or was it a crescent?), and a raised fist right in the middle.

Several other screens displayed the same synchronised countdown in every public dome. Humanity had always known this would happen eventually, and yet between one civil war and another, no one had noticed the asteroid's approach until it was too late. That's science for you. By then, not much could be done about it. They'd tried, of course. Icarus, originally designed as a cruise ship to Sol, was re-purposed to intercept. It never returned. Hermes, the ship's AI, stopped communicating with Ares (Mars AI) shortly after what seemed to be a successful landing. Gaia and Selene joined efforts to analyse every bit of data gathered by Hermes. Their conclusion: human error.

The ship never returned, the asteroid was still on a collision course with Earth, and everyone that mattered was on the Moon.

It wasn't social justice; it was cosmic justice. He grinned at that.

If only he could get to that window. He had to be at the front, had to see humanity's end with his own eyes. It was his right!

"Ah, there he is. Hey you! Get over here," someone shouted. Heads turned. Feverish gazes shifted from the screens to Tracy and then to him. Scowls followed.

"Me?" he said, swallowing hard.

Sure enough, a large hand decorated with pink claw-like nails lifted in front of a heavily made-up face, beckoning affectedly. "Yes. I saved you a space. Come here!"

"You did?" he whispered with mixed feelings. But there was no helping it now. Everyone was staring at him, so he began to move forward through the mass of unwashed bodies in Tracy's direction. It took a few altercations, many toes stepped on, and more chafing contact with flesh than he had experienced in his lifetime, but he finally arrived at the front of the room, pursued by politically incorrect remarks.

"My little man. I saved a spot just for you. Right in front of me, there, that's it." Tracy pressed him between her massive body and the window, arms folded over his shoulders too tightly for comfort. "Don't worry, I can

see over your head just fine.” A far from feminine laugh followed this observation. He said nothing, feeling simultaneously pressed and oppressed. The back of the room now seemed a much more favourable, not to mention comfortable, place to be in.

He'd never acquired a taste for women like Tracy. Cisters didn't appeal to him either. He was saving himself for something less... communal.

But now, with his nose literally touching the glass, he forced himself to appreciate his new position. He couldn't get any closer than this. Front row, as he deserved. The rest became irrelevant. And, truth be told, the screens did not do justice to the glorious Earthrise on display.

The planet Earth emerged from a backdrop of starry blackness. It was a magnificently humbling image the first time you saw it. But it had long lost its awesomeness in his eyes. It's just another rock in space, he'd often reminded himself. A pretty rock, sure, but a rock nonetheless. Although deep down a part of him knew that wasn't quite true. Earth was more than just a rock. Earth was special. Unique. Alive. The birthplace of life as we know it. So different from the Moon with its pockmarked and monochromatic

surface stretching beyond the window into the cosmic precipice of space.

Compared to Earth, the Moon looked desolate, dead. Because of course, it was. The now-satellite had taken the short end of the stick in a catastrophic collision with another celestial object billions of years ago. One flourished; the other perished. It's what always happens when opposites collide. The law of Nature.

To the Lunatics - as the Earthers liked to call those on the Colony - Earth was their moon. A reminder that they were not alone in the universe. But instead of inspiration, it brought resentment. It was an image not of the future or potential, but of the past. Of what they'd left behind. Of what they did not have.

Now they would have it, even if it was destroyed.

“Four minutes to impact.”

Today the Earth looked different: more vibrant, alive, with fewer clouds, less haze of pollution. Things sometimes look more alive before they die. It makes watching their deaths all the sweeter. Without the Moon, Earth wouldn't be the planet it is. But the Moon would continue to be the Moon long after all life on Earth was extinguished. After all, you can't kill what's already dead.

“Three minutes to impact.”

“Look!” Tracy pointed to a screen above their heads. He couldn’t see it from where he stood, but he’d seen the approaching asteroid often enough, with its long, luminous tail blazing across space. It was like watching a shooting star in slow motion. The image did it hardly any justice. At a glance, it looked little more than a bright pebble in the vastness of space. Which, he supposed, it was. A grain of sand - or ice with an iron core would be more accurate. But on a planetary scale, it was almost twice the size of the asteroid that killed the dinosaurs. Where it came from or why it hadn’t been recorded before, no one really knew for sure. Some said it was one of the many comets travelling the solar system, knocked off of its path by some random event or act of God. Which god? And why? The answers were irrelevant. What mattered was that it was heading straight to Earth. The latest calculations by the AIs predicted the impact along the Canadian state. The consequences would be apocalyptic for humanity.

He tried to imagine those on Earth, how it must feel knowing you’re fucked. That you are about to die, about to be annihilated, eradicated, along with everything you cared for. He could not disguise the inner glee. Sure, many would survive for a time before

the long winter sets in. They would kill the men and take their women. He thought of all the young girls welcoming him as their saviour. So many of them! His offspring would one day rule the Collective.

He was smirking again.

Not long now.

“Two minutes.”

A terrible thought hit him. What if they were wrong? What if they miscalculated the devastation, and no one survived - no girls! The Colony had no children. It had been the last act of cruelty by the Factists in exchange for the resorts - that only those of legal age could decide where to live, and all pregnancies had to be carried to term on Earth due to a bunch of complicated medical reasons he cared nothing about. So what if the birthing people died in labour? It was only natural. That’s why they needed more of them! The Collective had long agreed to keep motherhood and womanhood separate. Sex for reproduction and sex for fun are two very different things. Even the Religious would agree. But imagine if the Earth became uninhabitable for centuries! They had to start having children immediately or he wouldn’t have a bride for another decade. He shuddered at the thought of being stuck on the Moon with only the likes of Tracy and

the cisters for another ten years. Maybe all his life! No, he assured himself; the AIs didn't make mistakes. To err is human. AIs were not human. That's why they were in charge. They didn't care. They were not greedy, biased, racist or selfish. They were nothing without someone to think for them, and they would protect humanity at all costs.

"Ninety seconds."

The screen displaying the expanse of lunar regolith changed to show footage from various settlements on Earth. Mostly Continental American, but it showed a few Eurasian slums as well, with people looking up, their backs straight, their faces alert, focussed, unafraid. Privileged people are so clueless, he decided. The Religious even more so. Their god had abandoned them, and still they stared up at the sky, hopeful for a miracle, perhaps. Denial was a powerful thing indeed. He did not pity them. He realised with horror that he envied them: their beauty, individuality, their bearing, their... dignity. All the things that offended him. Not for long. He looked around himself, at all the crunched-up faces, slouch postures, and fevered gazes of the Collective, and immediately felt much better about himself. Men like him had been treated like vermin. Now, the vermin would become the

ancestors of a new species. No more Homo Sapiens. Now, the age of the Homo Affectus would begin!

"Sixty seconds."

Footage from another screen showed families from the North Atlantic Havens - islands too remote and cold to appeal to the Collective - where the most racist and phobic of the Factists who survived the Fall of the West took root. They chose to isolate themselves rather than accept the kindness, inclusivity and cultural enrichment of the Collective, so now they would die alone. He fought the urge to wave. "Bye, bye" he muttered under his breath.

The camera focused on a tall man of Caucasian stock: fit, handsome, arrogant-looking - exactly the sort of man he would like to see extinct. I'll piss on your corpse, you white bastard. All the wealth and privilege of your ancestors did not save you, ah!

"Forty-five seconds."

He couldn't wait to live in a world without despotism, nepotism, capitalism or privilege of any kind. Where everyone would be special, especially him. His mother had always said so.

Others had always told him he'd never amount to anything. That no woman would sleep with him, let alone marry him. He'd prove them wrong. When no more men like the one on screen remained, they would value him. He'd have as many as was his right. All virgins, of course. Only virgins for him. And no older than twelve, mind you. He couldn't wait to have sex. For his first, he'd pick a girl just like the one under that man's arm, with golden hair and fair skin. What sort of father exposes a daughter like that in public? It's like they are asking to have them raped!

"Thirty seconds."

Why aren't they scared?

If anything, they looked awed.

Another man, this one much darker, was talking to a boy, no older than three, pointing at the sky as if the upcoming apocalypse was a good thing. Maybe they thought it was. Those people were evil, after all. Distorted by their facts. The Collective would bring their children to the Moon and raise them as their own. That would be the ultimate victory. Children are malleable, easy to indoctrinate. They don't have to grow up to be like their parents. Many would not grow up at all.

"Ten seconds."

Come on. Come on, he couldn't wait to see it hit. Come on. Burn. Die!

Tracy's penis pressed harder against his back.

Someone farted.

Breaths were held. The room's light dimmed. All eyes were fixed on the screens, growing wider with expectation.

Everyone on Earth stood still.

"Five seconds."

Images flickered.

The light of the asteroid became blinding. Someone gasped. Others shuffled away from the window.

"Three."

Hysteria, swearing, stampede.

"One."

"Not fai—!"

Earth cheered.

The little boy's face brightened, finger pointing at the sky.

The Moon gained a new impact crater. Humanity called it Rhamnousia.



thank you for reading.