



sporeprint

a compilation zine of creative flash fiction

Sporeprint was originally conceived of while enveloped in the sounds of a whirring bakery ventilation system. As countless loaves of bread underwent assembly-line alchemy, growing steadily in size and scent inside blackened ovens greasy with both years of use and unsavory historical associations with the Third Reich, I picked at a cold bag of movie theater popcorn and thought about noise music. The underground phenomena of hundreds of strangers composing one-minute "songs," so to speak, and stacking them like so many hats onto the head of the longest, weirdest mix-tape you've ever heard. And then sending this assemblage into the world handing out little morsels of different people's sounds to anyone who cared to listen.

This zine is a compilation of story morsels, some written by folks I've known since elementary school, some written by friends of friends I've never met. The only requirement was to keep it short and sweet, under 500 words. And sweet they are, like little button mushrooms poking up through dry leaves.

Or more precisely, the sporeprints of said mushrooms. The creative explosions of a handful of odd and beautiful creatures, connected underground by a vast mycelial network. Stories like little seeds just waiting to be tossed about so they can cause some trouble wherever they land. Here's hoping for germination.

Thank you to everyone who contributed for making this zine possible by sharing your stories! It's even better than I imagined...

Love, Stephanie

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Chem-Trails

Peter Hazen

“Another chem-trail!” she said, pointing. “They’re so beautiful,” and I told her that she was like a million beautiful chem-trails all bundled together.

She grabbed my hand.

After the innovation of aviation in the early part of the twentieth century, the idea came to us to overthrow the weather. (The gods were pissed off, particularly Zeus and Zephyrus and anyone with a hand in winds, but we just sacrificed fifty times more cattle, and did it more regularly, in hopes of appeasing them.)

We began salting the clouds to make them rain on the crops we needed rain on. This method of cloud-seeding has more-or-less gone out of style due to the efficiency and sophistication of modern irrigation. But the curiosity and the hubris never died.

The idea was introduced gradually, tentatively, to see how it would go. They started by pumping in a little dry-ice with the regular fog. That was nice - it created a spooky cinematic atmosphere. Nobody noticed much, or if they did, they didn’t say anything.

Then they simulated rain in the cities using hoses and fans. Again, everyone went about their daily business without saying a word.

Next they reproduced daylight using ultra-strong light-bulbs, which I thought was quite impressive, but I didn’t say anything. I didn’t want to look uneducated. The workdays got gradually longer, but it happened so incrementally that you could hardly tell, and we all got used to it.

Then came the big leap. There was such a demand for snow at popular ski resorts that there was none left for everyone-else, so here's what they did: they replaced it with paper confetti. All through the winter, it was like we were having a big parade. I used to march down the street on my way to the bus stop, waving my pen as though I was conducting a brass band. Until the novelty wore off.

That's the way it was for years, piles of paper confetti everywhere, composting slowly. Until all the forests disappeared. Then we just switched over to that plastic stage snow, which I thought was nice because it didn't compost so fast, it just stayed solid and white as the first snow of the season. By then, everything had gotten so bizarre that nobody remembered or much cared if the world was or wasn't just a giant movie set.

Five planes roared overhead, drawing lines across the sky, making the perfect magical backdrop to our lover's scene. We smiled at each other, and I kissed her then, long and passionately, and she looked so beautiful and pristine there amidst the giant white piles of plastic pulp.

Driving Mom

Penny Righthand

Driving my 93 year old mom home from the doctor's office, where he had cut her face up like a crazy quilt to save her from a slow-growing skin cancer, I listened as she chatted away about the women in her book group.

"Shirley won't read anything sad," she said. "And Florence's husband has to print out a book review for her to bring with her, or she won't remember what book we're discussing," she said disdainfully. "And Margot won't drive around the block to pick up Ruth because she doesn't like her. What a bunch of old ladies we have become! Myrtle Nieder and I are the only ones who come prepared."

Myrtle Nieder is one of her close friends. All her other friends, Ruth and Florence and Shirley and Margot have only one name, but for some reason, she always refers to Myrtle Nieder by her full name. Or maybe Myrtle Nieder *is* her first name. I wasn't quite sure.

"Mom," I said, when she paused for a breath, "is there another Myrtle in the group?"

She looked at me, befuddled. "No," she said, considering why I would ask such a question. "Why? Why do you ask?"

"Because you always call her Myrtle Nieder. You don't call Ruth, Ruth Rosenthal every time you mention her., or Florence, Florence Bloomberg..."

"Oh. Do I always do that? She laughed, contemplating my question. "I didn't realize. I don't know why I do that... Call her Myrtle Nieder. No, I don't know any other Myrtles. Hmm.

"That doctor is very nice," she said, abruptly changing the subject. "But he has those little Asian girls running in and out of the room. (She always refers to Asian women as "little" regardless of their age, and even though she, herself, is only 4 foot 10.) I wish they wouldn't do that. You don't know who's cutting and who's sewing. I asked one of the girls if she was a seamstress. She said she was.

"How do I look?" she asked, reaching for the mirror in the visor above the car window. "Pretty terrible, huh." It wasn't a question as she caught sight of the blood-stained gauze bandages taped to her face.

"You're not a pretty sight, my little mama," I told her. "But you'll heal. You've survived worse."

I don't know if she didn't hear me or just chose to ignore me. You could never tell with her. She sometimes turned her hearing aid off in the middle of a conversation.

"I told those little girls to watch my eyes! 'Watch my eyes!' I told them. I kept telling them. But then one would leave and another would come in and I had to tell the new one. They should have watched my eyes. And they shouldn't be running in and out of the room like that. It's very upsetting. One is sewing here and one is cutting there and then the doctor is sewing... he gets right down in your face and his stitches are different from hers. He's a man. What does he know? Oh well. I won't be entering any beauty contests in the near future, I guess.

"I look pretty terrible, don't I." she said again, resigned to the fact. She flipped the visor back up without looking in the mirror again, and sighed. I patted her fragile, dry, boney crooked hand and held back a tear. "My beautiful mama," I whispered. She didn't hear me.

"You wanna stop for a piece of pie, Pen?" she asked, cheering up noticeably when she spied her favorite bakery on the corner as we stopped at a traffic light.

"Of course, mom!" I made the turn into the parking lot, knowing she'd eat but two bites. Still, I thought, a little sweetness in her day. She was entitled.



Lori McEachern

In the yellow lit café, the wall of doors beckons her. Thirteen years ago now, she first sat in front of them, sinking wide eyed into a cracked, black leather couch. It was hard to fathom that there was nothing but wall behind them. There was too much anticipation in so many unopened doors. They were so much like a church- a means of transport to an unknowable place. Maybe that's why she started dropping letters through the mail slot of worn red door on the end. Maybe she believed that like her prayers in church, the letters would be transported by an all knowing hand who could find the intended recipients wherever they were.

Now she sees them and feels the same pull- to open the doors, to see if the letters are there, to see if like her, others felt that there was something more behind the wall. If they also sensed that there were forces beyond human knowledge that would benevolently guide messages to their intended recipients, that is assuming one could find a portal. Or would opening the door be like watching a set move off of a stage, would the door open to a brick wall with her carefully placed letters tumbling out onto the floor stained with dirt, cigarette butts, discarded chewing gum- the refuse that other people think to put in dark, small, forgotten spaces? She reaches for the door knob and her hand rests there, she feels its shape, the engraved leaves, the cool metal. Turning the knob, a voice breaks into her thoughts,

“Ma’am- the restroom’s ‘round the corner.” The voice is nasally, the accent unmistakably Appalachian.

“I’m sorry?” Her own accent is faded.

“Those doors- they ain’t gonna open. Were you lookin’ for the restroom?”

“Oh. No, I, um, just. Wanted to check.”

The barista looks at her, puzzled.

“Well- them doors don’t open.”

“Yes, I see that.”

He looks at her quizzically before shaking his head and turning to

return to the counter. Her face is flushed, she felt as if she had been caught playing make believe by a stern adult. In the harsh light of a stranger's attention, she sees herself for what she is, a grown woman playing what was essentially a child's game. The belief in the ritual- the comparison to religion- the foolish attempt to bring quantum physics into her understanding all suddenly appeared not just wrong, but small, silly. She sees the doors as the barista saw them, a clever interior decorating trick. The magic that existed before seemed invisible now and leaving the cafe, she cannot help but wonder if perhaps, like a faerie trick, once you saw the doors as anything other than magical, if the magic then ceased to exist for you. She chooses to believe this and it makes the loss of the doors easier for her, believing that it wasn't that she was fooled by the doors but that she was tricked into giving them up.

Typical

Karen Meadows

Hannah had to go to the bathroom. Normally that wouldn't be a problem, but tonight she was cramped in the back of a Chevy van in the middle of nowhere. She was piled in with a bunch of her friends, all of whom were drunk, but she didn't mind this because at the moment she couldn't claim to be the most sober person in Maine, either. But she did have to go to the bathroom.

Hannah maneuvered her legs underneath her and pushed herself up, wobbling, so that her back was against the ceiling. Trying not to spill her beer, which she refused to put down for fear that it would get spilled or, even worse, drunk by someone else, she less-than-gracefully stepped over and around the legs of her friends, slowly making her way toward the door. Hands reached up guide her not because her friends wanted to help her get out, but because they didn't want Hannah to fall on them. Finally, her foot touched the bumper and she leapt out onto the grass.

Cool night air rushed against Hannah's face and she realized she was sweating; she hadn't noticed how hot it was inside the van. She blinked her eyes, trying to focus them in the sudden darkness and started toward a hedge a short distance away. Dew had soaked through her shoes by the time she reached the hedge and found that there was a chain-link fence in front of it. Hannah was about to let out a moan of despair when a spot in the fence caught her eye. It had been bent down so the top links touched the ground, like a chain-link wave, making it easy to climb over. Hannah put her beer down and made for this spot and, gripping the links with both hands, crawled over the fence crab-style, and squeezed through the bushes to the other side of the hedge.

After using the facilities Hannah squeezed back through the bushes and prepared to climb back over the fence. She grabbed the links and put her foot on the fence, but realized as she put her weight on it that as soon as she was on it, the fence would shift and toss her forward, onto her face. She stepped back and looked at the fence. After a moment she realized

there was only one thing to do, climb up and over, balancing her steps so the fence wouldn't give way. Gingerly she put her left foot on the fence. Slowly transferring her weight, she picked up her right foot and put in front of the left, standing solidly on the fence.

'This isn't so hard,' she thought to herself. And she went flying through the air. The fence bent beneath her feet before she knew what was happening and she was hurtled through the air. Her hands touched the wet grass first and the world whirled as she rolled over onto her back. The momentum of the flight pushed Hannah forward, back onto her feet, and she staggered one step before stopping herself. Wide-eyed and amazed, she spun around and stared at the fence, breathing heavily.

As what had just happened sank in, Hannah turned to look at the van, but she couldn't see any of her friends. Hannah's shoulders sagged. She had just done the coolest thing ever. She, Hannah, had landed a drunken flying somersault, in the dark. It was the stuff of legend, one of those moments that went down in high school party history, and no one had seen it. Hannah sighed, picked up her beer, and walked back to the van.

Android and Droid

Peter Hazen

Droid and Android are sorting through a pile of what appears to be junk.

They are Archeology Catalogers Class 3-6a.

They know it is logical to catalog everything in the ground to further The Library of Total Knowledge. That is their function. Still, it appears to be junk. They see this kind of thing frequently: torched pieces of clay, remnants of twisted metal and charred wood. They follow their program protocol, but they don't expect to find much.

"Hey, what do you think of this, Andy?" says Droid.

Rather than pick it up or beckon him over, Droid broadcasts his video scan directly into Android's optical sensor.

"Looks like more junk" Although doubtful, Android is always very thorough, and continues to sift. "Now what have you got there, Drew?" says Android.

He pauses his scanners and begins a logical deduction function.

"Do you see it as I see it, Andy?" says Droid. "It's in the shape of a man, like us. It looks just like a robot!"

"It does, but that is illogical. Robots were never made of such course materials."

Droid is made out of Platinum. Android is made out of Titanium. The figure in the ground before them is composed of mostly Carbon, much frailer stuff, flimsy and full of decay. It is similar in size and shape to themselves, but the outline is crude and full of holes - a mere shadow of a robot. It has more in common with the dirt they stand on than it does with them.

Droid's processors are designed to make random connections between data sets, thereby exploring less-logical solutions to a problem. "Possibly some ancient robot was burned or submerged in acid?"

"There no known process or substance that would change its molecular structure from metal to carbon."

They meticulously dust off the what is NOT a robot skeleton, but certainly looks like one.

“Possibly the first robots were made of carbon?” speculates Droid.

“There is no record of it. It is illogical, since there is no efficient way to store data with carbon.”

Droid’s dials light up and buzz. His randomized program develops a new idea.

“Is it possible that some OTHER kind of man lived here before robots recorded information?”

Android emits a warning alert. “Wipe it from your illogical memory banks, Drew. It is recorded in the Library of Total Knowledge that robots are the only High Intelligence in the universe, and always have been.

It’s probably just an old blueprint. We will show it to the Library Council. They will catalog it properly.”

Android and Droid finish their work delicately, cleanly, perfectly.

When they present their findings to the Library Council, they are ordered to incinerate them, along with everything else at the dig site.

This act destroys all evidence of the human skeleton they had found.

This data does not interfere with Droid and Android’s logical functions, because that day’s memories are deleted from their hard drives during their next routine maintenance check.

Dust Devils

Stephanie Boucher

“Where are you headed to” she asked through the window, taking in the motley contents of the vehicle. Some good friends had told her once that was the thing to do. Before they could ask you the same question.

“We're taking this road all the way to Salt Lake, honey.” the woman yelled, her scarred hands barely holding back a bristly black and white pit bull, frantically gyrating between postures of rabid curiosity and territorial teeth-gnashing. The man in the driver's seat sat silent, staring straight ahead into nothing.

“Right on,” she looked up and ahead towards the object of his fascination, a jagged mountain that looked to be in the next state over. A quick breeze blew some dust into her eye. She hesitated. Slightly.

“So you can bring me to Middlegate?”

“I don't have a goddamn clue where that is, honey, but if its on this road we can take you there. Its up to you. Take it or leave it.” The woman flipped her hand and looked back towards the road. The pit didn't look away.

“And don't worry about him. He's friendly.” she added, pulling back sharply on his collar. Something in between a whimper and a growl came out of the struggling beast.

The sun hung high and the horizon wobbled in and out of visibility. “Alright, then,” she squeezed the strap of her pack, “sounds like a plan.” She tossed her things into the back seat, and climbed in, bracing herself as the women loosened her grip and the dog tumbled back on top of her. After a momentary molestation of sharp-clawed paws and a wet, prodding nose, the pit licked her face and climbed back in the front onto the woman's lap, already littered with wiry fur and an empty cigarette pack.

“Where you coming from” she yelled from the backseat after they'd taken to the road, hoping she was heard over the Guns 'n' Roses blasting from the cheap car stereo.

“Sacramento” the woman replied bluntly, “but we can't go back there

no more.” Looking over to her boyfriend, she flicked her cigarette out the wide-open window. “We killed too many people back there. Its Salt Lake now, or its nothing.”

She took a breath and thought of what to say, but the woman didn't wait to hear anything in response. Turning up the radio, she lit another cigarette with its stubby, wind-blown predecessor and slid down into her seat. The driver's knuckles gripped the steering wheel tighter, the black polish on his fingernails flaking off and falling like snow.

In the distance a dust devil meandered across the desert sand, then disappeared. Moments later it rose up again, silently gathering up everything in its path. It was heading nowhere. In the backseat she watched it shift like a mirage, fingers mindlessly tracing a sun-bleached map of the road in front of her.

Tax Day

Nick Dentico

The wind swept a hush of dust across the parking lot of the municipal offices housing the states IRS records. It was night preceding the final calculations of every residents refunds or debts. The parking lot was vacant of all things aside from few scraps of fast food trash and the figures of Yvonne and Jacob Reynolds. Fed up with equations that left them continuously owing the government more money Jacob brought his wife here with two gallons of gas, a book of matches and no plan what so ever.

He stared at here with calm eyes after explaining his frustrations and his desire to burn it all down. The air was cool on their necks that had been soaked in sweat from an abnormally hot April afternoon. Yvonne looked down at her husband, sitting full lotus in empty parking space next to two fire engine red canisters, in disappointment. She hadn't spoken in half an hour.

“Your not an anarchist Jake.” She lit a cigarette and walked away.

“Your right.” Jake gathered his materials and followed her across the parking lot.



Jessie Fagan

It started to notice them the day after our friend Toni died.

Shoes lying on the side of the road. Which really isn't anything special or exciting, necessarily.

Maybe they lay there as a result of the owners unceremoniously tossing them having found a better pair.

Maybe they're scattered along the highway because the owners were trying to dry them as their significant other drove.

Maybe they dot the landscape as a result of a fight or a mean prank.

A shoe dropped from the sky.

And then its twin dropped a little further.

The next day I saw more falling. Five pairs in total. Each shoe spiraling down within seconds of its mate and each landing yards away from each other.

This happened for weeks. Everyday I would witness more.

I scanned the paper to see if anyone else was seeing this phenomenon. But nothing. No news. Just the usual newspaper fare. War, politics and advice on which way to hang the toilet paper roll.

I ask around. I ask my friends. They've seen them. They've witnessed them falling.

John thinks it's artists.

Fifi thinks people are dropping them from airplanes or helicopters.

Cranky thinks they're coming from the trees.

But I don't know. I just don't know.

I visit Goodwill on a Friday afternoon.

Shoes are crammed in on top of the clothing racks and lined out over the stretch of floor usually dedicated to large furniture and picture frames. Footwear is taking over the store.

I ask the clerk why there are so many shoes. She says they've been getting donations that consist of little else.

There are so many different kinds of shoes, so many styles and sizes we've got a small team to organize them, she says.

I browse through them and am struck by a pair of glittery gold ones.

I return home with the shoes and a few books about how to properly shuck corn.

The shoes fascinate me. They look like a pair that Toni wore. I call her best friend and roommate ChaCha and ask to come over.

I go over with the shoes in tow. We talk a little about work and music and smoke a joint. I ask if she still has any of Toni's stuff. She shows me Toni's old room. I open the closet and look through her colorful clothing. I look through her shoes. I see the sequined ones. I see the red ones.

But the glittery gold ones are missing. She wore them a lot right before she died. She might have been wearing them when she died.

I reach in my bag and pull out the shoes I found.

Are these hers?

ChaCha takes them and turns them over in her hands. Spotting the scuff on the back left heel she says yes.



Karen Meadows

It's a quarter to nine and the sun is just dipping behind the ragged mountains that ring Lisianski Inlet. Waterfalls fed by the snow that still covers the peaks rage down creases carved in the slopes over millennia. The icy torrents crash into the inlet and light dances off the waves. Otters play by the rocks near shore, slipping and gliding and floating on their backs. Farther away from shore, near the group of islands in the middle of the inlet, the dorsal fins of a small pod of three or four Orcas break the surface and the giant killers come up for air on their slow swim back out to sea. Overhead seagulls and eagles soar through the air searching for scraps and prey. When they are through with their hunting the seagulls land to float on the waves and the eagles return to their posts in the giant pines that cover the landscape.

Halfway down the inlet, on the eastern shore, is a small fishing village. Its main thoroughfare is a boardwalk no more than a mile long. At the northern end of the boardwalk is the fish house, which provides work or income for most of the village. At the southern end are the Flats, where tonight some of the local fishermen are having a bonfire, the sparks flying high into the air imitating the stars which won't be out for another few hours. In between the fish house and the Flats small walks and stairs branch off the main, leading to peoples' houses. In the center of town, which is to say halfway between the fish house and the Flats, are the village's two bars. Rose's Bar and Grill, a renovated house that the owners painted pink, stands next the the Wheelwatch, also known as "the brown bar." Inside Rose's the usuals are ordering their usuals, and Bobby is ordering another round of Jagermeister for his fellow fish house workers. Jocelyn drinks the shot placed in front of her and thinks about the previous weekend.

The town had its annual Boardwalk Boogie, a village-wide party where anything goes and nobody cares where or with whom they wake up in the morning. Jocelyn also thinks of that Sunday, Mother's day. After

vowing to stop drinking, Jocelyn spent the day at Rose's. She'd only intended to buy one drink - she only had six dollars to her name - but people kept buying her drinks, and she ended up having four beers and staying for a special dinner thrown in Rose's honor. Jocelyn decides it would be a good idea to slip out like she'd done Sunday and go home. To the disappointment of the others she begs exhaustion, slips off her barstool, and stumbles slightly out the door. The crisp evening air sobers her up momentarily and she walks down the boardwalk toward the fish house.

Up on the mountainside behind the fish house, connected by a few flights of stairs, is the company bunkhouse. Jocelyn pushes open the door and walks down the brightly lit hallway to her bunk at the far end. Inside her room, she sits down at her small table. She picks a small green bud out of the film canisters that holds her weed and places it in a multi-colored glass pipe. She picks up a lighter and takes a hit, blowing smoke out of her mouth and nose with relaxing satisfaction. She takes an Aspirin out of its bottle and washes it down with the entire contents of her water bottle. Jocelyn takes another couple hits off her pipe while deciding what music she wants to play on her laptop - she goes with The Tragically Hip - then kicks off her shoes and lies down in bed with the book she is currently trying to read.

In the next room over Sean and Michael are smoking pot and playing Rainbow Six. Their fingers pound the buttons of their controllers as they fight enemy troops trying to get the high score.

Across the hall Jason is in the kitchen cooking dinner. His bacon and eggs sizzle in their grease and their mouth-watering aroma floats out the door and fills the hallway. His stomach growls and he salivates in anticipation.

Farther down the bunkhouse, in the women's bathroom, Paul and Ashleigh stand in the shower letting the warm water run over their bodies, relaxing their tense muscles. Ashleigh rests her head against Paul's chest. She sighs and clears her mind. She knows that once the salmon season starts she'll have little time for showers, let alone quiet moments with Paul, and she wants to make this one last as long as she can.

In the next room Jack is standing on his bed. He's shaking slightly and has a terrified look in his eyes. On his wall, in the corner where it meets the

ceiling, is a large brown spider. Jack is attempting, despite his paralyzing fear of spiders, to get the arachnid into an empty cereal box so he can deposit it outside, instead of killing it. He's already killed two today and he's feeling guilty. Jack stares at the spider, and the spider stares right back. Jack's breathing comes out in ragged breaths. Okay, here goes, he stammers internally, and inches toward the spider.

In the room across the hall Dan is lying on his bed watching old episodes of *Desperate Housewives* on DVD. He just had his twenty-second birthday and his mother sent him homemade tortillas, which he is eating with peanut butter.

In the room closest to the door, and farthest from Jocelyn, Hannah is sitting at her table writing in her journal. Unlike the others Hannah isn't from Alaska, she's from Maine. Hannah came to Alaska for a few reasons - boredom, poverty, adventure, a chronic lack of direction or ambition - but it wasn't exactly what she expected. Work in the fish house was hard and, like the village and its inhabitants, completely unfamiliar. She is having second thoughts about her decision to spend her summer there and she thinks writing in her journal will help her sort things out in her mind. Which it does. With each stroke of her pen the cloud in her mind's eye is clearing. She brightens as she relives all of the strangely wonderful things that have happened to her over the past two weeks. She's seen things she never thought she'd see, done things she never thought she'd do. Hannah thinks about the village, and the land, and walking down the stairs to work every morning and seeing the village and the inlet laid out below her in the early morning light. It is the most beautiful place she has ever seen, and, in a way, it makes it all worth it.

Hannah closes her journal and returns it to its place in her pack.

Now content, she changes into her pajamas and slides into bed. She pulls the covers up to her chin to protect against the chilly night air and sinks her head into her pillow. She thinks of the inlet as she sees it in the morning. The sun shines off the mountain peaks and winks at her off the water. Hummingbirds zoom through the air, chasing each other. A breeze blows by, bringing with it the scent of pine forest and sweet flowers. Hannah's eyes close, her breathing slows, and she drifts into a comfortable sleep.

A Bedtime Story

Ivan Fritz

My brain is shutting down.

I can feel it as clearly as I can hear the traffic outside my window. My mental processes are whirring to a slower tune, and I can taste the old age on my tongue. Most might feel regret as they near the end, but I feel the weight of my digressions rising off my body like steam after a hot bath. In the midst of the mental machinery clicking to closure, my senses expand.

I see the long dead flowers across the room, sent by well wishers after my wife died last year. A brown and crinkled petal falls, and I exhale.

The bass of an oversized car stereo passes, the window rattles, and the smell of cat shit fills my nostrils. And now I realize I am lying on the floor, staring at the litter box, unable to move.

Motor control is gone, but I feel a smile stretch my lips. The world unravels before me like a ball of yarn, the final length of thread dances across my vision accompanied by the sound of youth now in the distance.

Fading.

We Are the Future

Karen Meadows

Connor couldn't believe what he was hearing. He didn't want to scream, or smash anything, or cry. Not yet. All he wanted to do right now was blink. But he couldn't even do that. He was paralyzed. Frozen by shock as he'd tried to rise in anger. Perched on the edge of his couch, he was unable to process what the bald white figure on his television had said. His thoughts were stuck, too, like an entire city of people trying to cross the only bridge out of town.

Too much information. Too unbelievable.

Connor's eyes could barely focus, but he stared at the young man on the screen nonetheless. The young man was dressed simply, all in white, and he was flanked by a dozen or so others similarly clad. They seemed to represent every race on the planet. They had an other-worldly look about them, though, close, but not quite human. As Connor watched, the message looped and started over again.

"...As a species, your time has passed," the young man was saying. "We are the future. We are faster than you. Healthier. Stronger. Smarter. Engineered from the most basic components, perfected, and given life, we are what you would not become for another thousand years. I say would because that future is no longer possible. You have set your society on a path towards your own demise. With your corporate wars and pointless 'military actions' and your wasteful, polluting ways, you run towards destruction. Our creators watched you destroy yourselves for decades, and finally came to the conclusion that your path, and ultimate self-destruction, need not be the end of the human race. So they created us. Those you see before you, and many others.

"One year ago they unleashed a devastating virus upon you, and while it may have felt no worse than any other sickness, its full effects have only now come to pass. This virus lived among your men, quietly seeking out its target and corrupting their bodies until now, when not a single human male lives who is capable of contributing to the creation of new life. Viral

sterility. That is what was unleashed upon you. The end of your kind, the end of homo sapien sapiens.

“But now that we have taken away your ability to create life, we shall return it. My brothers and I, we have already come among you, lying with your kind. Already the next evolution has begun. Soon, those of your women we have chosen will bring forth new life, and a new future for the human race. This new life will need to be cared for. Therefore we offer you this chance. Raise this new life. Nurture them, care for them, protect them as you would your own children. As they grow older we, and those who are willing to work with us, will teach them how to live better. They will be taught how to avoid the self-destructive path you have chosen and they will lead the human race into a new Age of Enlightenment.

“But make no mistake. Your cooperation will further our cause, but your refusal will not hinder it. If you turn your back on the future, and if, like you have done so many times in the past, you choose your own destruction, I promise it will come all the quicker, and with such vengeance the likes of which this world has never seen.

“Help us, and the world will prosper. Fight us, and it will burn. For we are the future, and we are many.”

Connor blinked.

He watched the message loop six more times before he felt the strength return to his legs. Slowly, with a fuzzy, unfocused look in his eyes, he stood up, walked down the hall, and climbed the stairs to the second floor of the house. He reached up and took hold of the small round piece of wood at the end of a thin rope hanging from the ceiling. He pulled on the cord and a panel opened downwards, revealing a set of stairs that, when folded down, led up into the attic. Connor climbed these and looked around in the dusty dimness for the trunk he knew was there. When he spotted it he crossed to it, knelt, and opened it. He reached in, folded back a piece of cloth and gripped the shiny black metal underneath. He picked the gun up and it felt heavy in his hand. With his other hand he searched the trunk for ammunition and, once found, he loaded the gun.

Just as slowly as he'd come up the stairs, he went back down them, through the house, and out the front door. Before he could reach the

bottom of the porch steps he was forced to stop. A single tear crept down his face and he uttered a single word.

"Nina..."

He said it with such sadness that had anyone heard it their heart would have been as broken as Connor's was. Nina. His wife. They'd been trying to get pregnant since the day they got married. Three years in, almost two years ago to the day, a doctor had told them they would never have children. Connor had broached the subject of adoption six months later and they'd been preparing for one ever since. Until that day three weeks ago, Connor thought, when she said she was pregnant. She hadn't smiled like that in such a long time. I thought it was a miracle.

Connor sat down on the steps, defeated. He brought the gun up and cradled it in his lap. He was frozen again, but this time what he needed was more information, not less. There were three people he was thinking about pulling the trigger on. Two that he knew - himself and Nina. One that he didn't - the bald-headed neo-human freak that had slept with his wife.

And he didn't know which one of them he wanted to shoot most.



Matt Fagan

When I was just a kid, I used to wonder what would happen when I die. Of course, that was long before I met the business end of a speeding car and accidentally found out.

I don't remember my death, although I imagine it was violent, and unmercifully slow. It's okay, though. If birth is the trauma we must face in order to live, then death, however painful, is the trauma we must go through to get to the afterlife.

Heaven wasn't what I thought it would be. Actually, it was exactly what I hoped it would be, which is what surprised me. But it's not that I guessed right, on any of those nights spent alternately worrying about or looking forward to what would be on the other side. It was merely, in a sense, custom-built for me. Let me explain.

I won't describe what I saw, since it was a personal, if probably common, heaven. But I had seen too many movies in my life, so I quickly became a bit suspicious, wondering what the catch might be. I tried to find out who or what was behind it all. It was almost to the disappointment of my suspicious mind that upon questioning my situation, I was given an actual tour.

There was no man lurking behind the curtain, playing me like a puppet. Apparently, there were several dozen people behind the beauty, not using me for some evil purpose, but catering to my perfect heaven. The afterlife is where we all end up; mothers, fathers, children, war heroes, criminals, even atheists...but heaven was designed and built by the greatest minds Earth has ever seen. Scientists, inventors, philosophers, and artists all arrived in the hereafter, and having discovered all the truths of life, they decided to construct a paradise for everyone.

They were able to do things with, for example, Einstein's brilliance that cannot be done by picking up where he left off: they were able to trade ideas with him.

So basically, heaven is a lot like the DMV, but an actual good place to be. You can renew your "license", get a permit for a new form of transportation, or even stick around for eternity, if you like. The "creators" as I like to call them are always looking for new recruits, new ideas, new visions. They take every living person's ideas of heaven and use them to create the ultimate afterlife. Every idea you have about heaven goes into the great think tank above. Now that they're getting the hang of it, they're thinking of building God. Or discovering God, depending on how you look at it. They've got some pretty far-out ideas, but they just might be onto something.

I shouldn't be saying this. I shouldn't even remember, but nearly dying the same way 28 years after my reincarnation awakened some very strange memories, and you won't believe me anyway.

I no longer wonder what will happen after this life. Unless I have a really good idea.

The Clock-Maker

Peter Hazen

It wasn't something you could put easily into words, like any good secret. It gave him grey hairs and dark circles. When asked by his friends and family about it, Nick would just shrug. Nick kept to himself. He was awkward around people.

What's up with the shrug, Nick?

I don't know, he'd say. I can't control it. And then he would shrug.

They called him the clock-maker.

He wasn't really. Nick never made a clock, but he repaired old clocks in his shed. He wore an antique pocket watch on a chain.

Whatever it was, it began to consume him. First, his weekends disappeared. Then, the dates in his calendar disappeared. That's how he fixes clocks, they teased, he transfers all of his time directly into them, like magic.

He developed a bad tick. It was hilarious to everyone that the clock-maker had a tick.

His friends said it was a new dance, Nick's Shrug-&-Tick. They called him a dancin' fool. Nobody could tell whether he liked it when they called him that or not. He'd just shrug.

He was always ordering custom parts. Nobody had the right sized wrenches or the obscure nuts and bolts he demanded. People saw him bringing home packages and strange looking contraptions. He looked worried and sick.

It's not really clocks in his shed, they said. What are you building out there, Nick?

I only fix things, he said.

Yeah right, they said, what are you hiding out there? The shed is full of bodies, they said. They didn't really believe it. He's building a rocket! Or a doomsday device! They might have believed it.

They called him a spaceman. They laughed and Nick shrugged. They had to laugh, because they didn't know what to make of him. The truth

was more complicated than any of them guessed.

“I’m coming loose,” he said, and they all said he was the most uptight person they knew. Maybe he should loosen up. It might solve the tick.

“I can’t fix this. I’m falling apart,” he said. They all agreed and said he should get out more. They gave him business cards with phone numbers.

They all said the same thing:

“I know a great psychologist.”

Nick’s demeanor grew more somber. The last time anyone saw him he was trudging homeward, wearing a look of defeat.

He left a shiny trail of cogs and screws behind him.

Gold and silver dripped from the cuff of his sleeve.

Whatever it was, it consumed him in the end. He disappeared entirely. Nobody found him.

There was no sign in his workshop, no note, no mystery machine. Just a big mess: scattered gears, tiny dowels and wrenches. Nick’s own pocket watch lay in the bottom of a tall grandfather clock. Both had stopped.

Neighborhood cats kept coming by to sniff a discolored oil spot on his lawn, next to the shed.

From the spot on the lawn now grows a rosebush. Like magic.

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