

## REFUND

This is how it would have gone if anyone else was around to see it.

Beginnings are always the hardest part. Things don't just come on all of a sudden, they build up over time. It's all a product of your personality and the choices you randomly made five years ago. If you ask me, the whole business is arbitrary and totally disheartening. Maybe if you were my therapist you'd suggest this had something to do with my taking drugs. Sure, if it matters. All I can say is by the time you figure out what the hell is going on, it's way too late.

Anyway, the whole mess started when I was at work. Generally speaking we were employed by Impulse Dynamics, but our unit was so many divisions down the food chain that saying so didn't really mean anything in particular. Kind of like when you repeat the same word a bunch of times in a row until it sounds like complete nonsense. If there had been a water cooler in the office, we would have been standing around it, but sadly lacking one we were just a few poor schmucks trying to make do.

Normally you'd expect us to have been bullshitting about the latest terrorist bombings in Sea Shade or the transparent top Shawna Cherry was wearing at the Image Awards. Not that we gave a shit about those things, of course. The routine was established and you didn't want to make a scene. Still, in serious news, the Population Control movement had made gains in the polls and things were looking a bit dicey. But we weren't talking about that either. The topic this time was Joe Meadows.

I don't know what Joe actually did for the company, but who cares? It's irrelevant. The point of our little conference was that Joe had been given the mood implant. The cops had come around and fingered him as an emotional delinquent, which was not really all that surprising. If you had to pick someone it would probably be him. After all, the best thing anyone ever said about Joe is that he occasionally made it as far up as dour on a good day.

What specifically Joe had done was unclear. We had even odds on a bar fight and indecent exposure. Either way, he was a first-time offender and got to keep his job.

Joe's last day as a pessimist had been Friday. Today was Monday and we had already noticed the change. A few of us went up to his floor to see for ourselves. Joe was so outgoing you might have mistaken him for a cheerleader if he looked more like one. When he laughed, his mouth opened wide enough to reveal at least a hundred extra teeth. I almost thought he was going to unhinge his jaw and lunge at us out of sheer good humor.

Buster said he had heard the implant the cops used was industrial strength, a different thing altogether from the commercial version. Mike said even if you somehow managed to take it out, your nervous system would short circuit. I remember looking over at the rows of beige cubicles stretching off into the distance and wondering how anything could inspire less hope than this.

It's true that a memo had gone around a while back. In a few choice words it touted the productivity benefits of routine perkiness and urged assistance for those found suffering from a chronic lack of pep. In other words, the company would foot the bill should you elect to get the implant. Although Joe's hand had been forced, I didn't think they would have gone to all of that editorial trouble if there weren't other potential miscreants lurking in our midst. It made me feel anti-social.

As far as the mood implant goes, you've probably seen the ads. I think it might even be manufactured by some subsidiary of Impulse. "Protect your mental health from debilitating mood swings! Regulate your innermost dreams and desires! Achieve equilibrium within your emotional life!" And so on. Seeking spiritual bliss through consumerism has always been popular and this was no exception. Even if you wouldn't do it yourself you know a lot of people are gullible enough.

When I was a kid we used to play at the beach and not worry about any of this crap.

After work I made the reasonable move of trying to catch the subway. Eventually I made it, but

not before nearly being trampled by a clump of oblivious teenagers captivated by their flashing eye screens. It wasn't even close to the first time that had happened. I could see the little lines of text scrolling in reverse across the inside of their lenses as they stumbled right into me.

The kids, what they did was cutting-edge to them. Two hundred words a minute direct from the brain stem out to their current circle of friends. Never mind the question of why the fuck one would even bother. Every year a few thousand of them died ambling vacantly into traffic. I certainly wasn't about to grieve. It almost made me want to join Population Control.

Looking down after they passed, I could see the generation gap widening steadily between my legs. Sooner or later I was going to have to jump.

Inside the subway car it was more of the same. There were only a couple of us not jacked into something or other. If the real world had gone up in a mushroom cloud right then, probably no one would have noticed as long as the communication grid still worked.

This got me thinking about the mood regulator again. The thing plugged into the same socket, which was usually on the inside of the wrist but could theoretically be anywhere. We all had one. Essentially, the idea was that operating physical devices became obsolete once you got a direct link. The brain reacts to things a lot faster without a middleman, I guess.

The whole thing supposedly started with the army. They were looking for a way to make simulations as realistic as possible. From there they figured out how to do other stuff, like monitor brain activity and track bodily movements. It might have been BattleLust 5000 that spawned the public craze. Now you have everything from virtual sex worlds to instant anger suppressors. No surprise the cops finally got in on the fun.

How it works is electrical, I think, but I'm no scientist. After the right nerve conduits were identified you could send external data through the link and get it translated by the brain into chemical signals. Or something like that. I do know that pretty soon they were fitting babies at the hospital. By

now you pretty much need that receptor if you want to collect a paycheck or do anything else on the legal end of the spectrum. Sure, some people held out, but when is that not the case?

I didn't know what I wanted, exactly, but I knew it wasn't this. It just felt like civilization had taken a wrong turn somewhere. At this rate I hated to think what future generations might be like. They would probably wither away and die if left unplugged for more than five minutes.

In a way I could relate to Joe. I was doing okay, but there wasn't a whole hell of a lot to get excited about, either.

I climbed the stairs out of the subway tunnel and walked a few dingy yards. Home was a rancid little hovel in Valley Heights, an amorphous modern sprawl consisting primarily of block after block of identical fifty-five floor apartment buildings. Actually, the flat itself was not too bad, it was just my housekeeping that one might call abysmal.

Soon as I got in I popped a couple capsules. It would have been more abnormal if I hadn't. Nothing like getting nice and fucked up after a long day's work. I stared noncommittally into space for a while to give those puppies a chance to kick in.

After that I flipped on the news. There was an anchorwoman standing in front of a phony night scape of the city. She was striving valiantly to look grave under several pounds of caked-on makeup.

“For those of you just joining us, we have a deeply tragic report for you today. Another terrorist bombing in the commercial district has claimed the lives of at least forty people, with an unknown number still missing. Several structures were entirely destroyed in the explosion. As we speak, rescue crews are busy combing the rubble for survivors. We will keep you updated on any future developments.”

She went on with an expression of feigned concern. “Experts are attributing this heinous crime to the Population Control political group, who are already suspects in numerous similar offenses around

the country. The revolutionists claim to want a concrete policy addressing the over-population crisis, but most informed individuals can see little motive to their actions besides violence, carnage, and mayhem.”

I clicked it off. Sure, it wouldn't be a ton of fun if you were unlucky enough to be at the scene. But I wasn't and this sort of shit went down every day. Or so it seemed.

I went into the kitchen and threw something in the microwave. For no reason I remembered the kids from the subway station with a twinge of annoyance. What a waste of flesh. If you spend all of your time describing what's happening to you, how can anything ever actually happen? They would be better off getting stuck with the mood chip instead of Joe Meadows, who for the most part kept his own life together.

Like I said, there were always those types who got the implant voluntarily. Not all of them were stupid kids, either. In today's hectic and ultra-demanding world, there's just no time for reflection or personal growth, let alone the methodical solving of intricate mental problems. Not when you can get it taken care of for you automatically.

On the whole I blamed the therapy fad. These days you couldn't get by without a personal shrink, and the drive-thrus simply didn't cut it on a regular basis. If you were well off enough you might even have three or four so you could walk out with the bonus feature of a bottomless supply of witty anecdotes about their conflicting opinions. Personally, I was neither rich nor interested. So I just took my capsules and called it even.

Made you wonder a little, though. How were you supposed to know where personality ends and the chip begins? When did you decide that someone's outlook was dysfunctional? The cops certainly didn't ask these kinds of questions, they just stuck the thing in your wrist socket and then went out for coffee before nailing another freak.

I went to sleep uneasy that night, dreaming of Joe with a new mouthful of shining shark's teeth.

A couple weeks went by and I had to re-up. Again, this wasn't noteworthy in and of itself, except that in the meantime my dealer had evidently dropped off the face of the earth. Despite my best efforts at discretion I imagined him shackled to his favorite cinder block, plying his trade at the bottom of the nearest lake. I decided not to bug him anymore. However, that meant going on the hunt.

What a good dealer did was keep an eye on the public notice bulletins. The state of home chemistry was such that a new product could hit the street months before it garnered enough attention to become officially illegal. Impulse would eventually add everything to their piss test regimen, but not right away. We thrived on the edge of a technicality, at least where our private entertainment budget was concerned. Lacking this public service at the moment put me at an unfortunate disadvantage.

I knew where to go, though, so I went. You have to play blind sometimes.

After a couple of awkward and fruitless exchanges I met the bum. I only call him that out of convenience. The vast majority of them weren't actually bums per se, they just looked like it as a pertinent disguise. Selling capsules was probably a disguise, too, but I didn't know what was behind that. More importantly, from my perspective, a few select gestures ascertained that he was holding.

“Two credits a pop,” he muttered under his breath.

“Lemme see it first.”

He flashed me a mini-pouch full of caps. I caught about a quarter-of-a-second glimpse of the blue striped casing on some pills.

“Thirty?”

“Yeah.”

I slipped him a pre-paid card and he palmed me the bag underhanded. Turning away and –

Lights came on out of nowhere. For a second I couldn't see anything in the glare. Eventually the world came back into focus and where that bum motherfucker had been standing was a strapping young cop, freshly starched uniform and all. He tapped his baton on his hip as I instinctively cringed a little.

“You wanna tell me what you're doing out here?”

Out of a long-standing deference toward authority, I didn't answer. He didn't wait for me to.

“What you just put in your pocket is prohibited as of last month under the Stability Act. Give it up.”

I don't know why he bothered talking in the first place because he just grabbed the half-visible sack out of my coat.

He glowered at me, flexing overly developed jaw muscles. “Got an ID?”

I whipped it out and passed it over. He took it and scanned the strip with his handheld.

“First offense? Good deal for you.”

I shrugged and looked appropriately contrite. His badge said his name was Otto and I thought that was punishment enough.

“Well, you know the drill. Come down to the precinct and get chipped and you'll still make it home tonight.”

It hit me as soon as he said it. I knew about the Stability Act. That was how they got Joe. Any crimes involving violence, sexual deviance, or drug trafficking were now subject to the implant. There wasn't any way around it when he led me over to the squad car parked discreetly behind a row of filthy dumpsters. My eyes panned frantically over the perimeter, but if there had been an opportunity to run, it had already passed. I kicked myself for not being more diligent about scoping out the scene. Holy shit! This couldn't be real.

It stayed real the whole car ride over. The reinforced metal grille between the front and back seats made sure you didn't forget it. When we got there I was marched into the station like a pig slated for the deep-fryer. I wound up in a small square room decked out in hospital green. There was a tiny slit of a window high on the wall that was probably worse than no window at all for its sheer uselessness.

They came in and made me sign like a hundred different pieces of paper, but I'll spare you the details of that. It wasn't as if I had any choice in the matter. By then they had already given me the lecture, too. Where it got more interesting was when the paramedic came in.

She was not too shabby-looking for a cop and was holding a miniature anti-static bag. I knew quite well what its contents were.

“All right, hon, hold still for me,” she cooed unconvincingly. The metal edge of the chip's connectors glittered under the halogens as she held it out.

I quickly debated the merits of resisting. The mental image of bursting into the hallway only to be taken down in a rain of gunfire pretty much resigned me to my fate.

Rather anti-climactically, the whole thing only took a few seconds when she put it in me. Kind of a tingling sensation up the spine fading gradually to a slow pulse at the bottom of the neck. Then I got hit by a bolt of nausea strong enough to double me over. I shot her an accusing look.

“Don't worry, you'll feel fine in a few hours.” She sized me up disinterestedly. “Now, go check in at the front and you're free to leave.”

I staggered out in a daze. No one paid the slightest attention as I shambled directly through the front entrance and on to the sidewalk. The tunnel wasn't far and I was home and asleep before my brain had a chance to confront the intruder on any conscious level.

That night I dreamed of my childhood. There were these trash heaps we used to play in, piled high above the city. We went digging like spelunkers in the uncharted bowels of the earth. Doesn't sound like much now but you had to be there.

All things considered, I woke up the next morning feeling pretty good. If you were so inclined you might even have called it chipper. I bounced enthusiastically out of bed and started getting ready for work.



In the kitchen my toolbox was out and open on the table. For some reason the wrench looked a little bent. I didn't remember trying to fix anything the night before, and upon inspection the bookshelf was still just as broken as I had left it the last time this issue came up. But it didn't seem too consequential at the time. A quick cup of coffee and I was ready to hit the road.

I thought about Joe some more on the way in. His luminous smile bobbed and floated in my mind like a Cheshire Cat. To my knowledge, nobody had complained about his upgraded persona as of yet. That was reassuring.

As soon as I got there I discovered unsurprisingly that Human Resources wanted to see me. No doubt concerning my brand new, state-of-the-art, chipped self.

It was Amber, as I was sort of hoping it would be. She had long red hair and liked to wear patterned skirts. I went into her office readily.

“So we heard about your little incident.” She said it with a straight face but I imagined a tinge of irony in there somewhere.

I gave her my best nod. She was pretty cute when you thought about it.

She looked at me inscrutably. “As you know, first-time offenders are guaranteed immunity from employment penalties. Your record has been good up to this point and we are inclined to stand behind you in this matter.”

I grinned fiendishly at her. That all sounded quite reasonable.

“Of course, due to the criminal nature of the situation, the company cannot offer you reimbursement for the implant procedure as we would otherwise be inclined to do.”

This struck me as blandly obvious, but I waved it away amiably with a dismissive gesture.

Suddenly I noticed the stack of purchase orders on the desk. They were invitingly blank, just waiting to be filled out with whatever you needed. The printing was done in a tactfully embossed, smoothly curved font on a soothing, cream-colored, hard-stock paper. The company logo stood out stark

and crisp at the top.

I was about to reach out and grab one when she said my name. I snapped back to the present.

“Sorry?”

“I was just wondering how you feel right now, if you don't mind my asking.”

Really, I felt fabulous. That is, if your rating scale was based around an insipid sense of traditional hope-filled optimism. In polite terms I told her so.

When I ran into Joe in the hallway later I could tell he had heard. Our silent mirth filled the air while our mutual grins stretched to epic proportions. Yeah, the thing was definitely working. I still kind of wanted a capsule but for a bit there life was decent.

A few days later. I got home from work at the usual time. Although I had forgotten to put the beer in the fridge the night before or whenever I had brought it in, I grabbed one anyway and headed for the couch. There would be no more caps for the time being, sadly, but in their absence I could do my best. I quickly moved some miscellaneous junk over to the coffee table and plopped down with immense satisfaction. For a minute I just sat there, comfortably numb, not thinking about much of anything.

Snapping on the video screen subsequently revealed the fattest man I had ever seen. You could probably have extracted his jowls and used the tanned hide to clothe most of the children in Africa. He was wearing a snappy suit and was clearly supposed to be some kind of government advisor. A female voice was narrating over patriotic background music.

“– happy to have Dr. Miles Johnstone on the program tonight to talk about the devastating recent attacks on our city. Dr. Johnstone is a Senior Analyst with the National Security Commission and has promised to offer our viewers unique insight into the Party's new Rapid Response plan.”

Dr. Johnstone tried to smile, but his cheek muscles couldn't lift the weight.

“Thank you, Donna, very pleased to be here.”

He cleared his throat gutturally. “As the Daily Times and others have reported, in the next session of Congress we will be asking for a temporary increase in the budgetary allocation for the War on Terror. We believe victory is finally near at hand and can be obtained at last with just a nudge more support from our fellow taxpayers.”

Pause to catch his breath. “The public has every right to expect these detestable villains brought to justice, and we have every obligation to see it done. That is why we are requesting a mere three point five percent enhancement in the war budget beginning next quarter, so that we can perform our solemn duty and make the streets safer once more for you and your —”

I must have zoned out because now the announcer was speaking again. “Dr. Johnstone, for our audience, are you referring to the militants known as Population Control?”

A grunt of affirmation. “Absolutely, Donna, yes indeed. I am pleased to report that we are closing in on the upper echelons of the organization and by all accounts are poised for a dramatic breakthrough.”

The fire of intensity kindled in his eyes. “Let me emphasize that our government has tried, many times, to hold diplomatic talks with the renegades, only to be utterly rebuffed. These fugitives do not want to negotiate, they simply want destruction. But we shall remain steadfast. Not only is this government prepared to address the over-population issue, we vow unequivocally to protect the security of our nation and the freedom of its precious citizens. We will not see —”

At that point I was still reclining on the couch, having just taken a swig of lukewarm beer, when I caught movement in my peripheral vision. Glancing at the wall next to the screen, I saw it. You might have called it a millipede, if millipedes were glossy pink and the approximate girth of your thigh. In a state of alert horror I noticed that the fleshy body was pulsing idly. As the thing trundled sluggishly up the surface of the cheap siding, each saunter of its spindly legs made another dent in my increasingly

tenuous composure.

Without formulating a plan, I leaped to my feet, spilling most of my beer in the process. Needless to say, continuing to sit there ambivalently no longer seemed a viable option. The beast, detecting my maneuver, emitted a shrill wet squeal and rocketed up toward the juncture of the ceiling. It was going for a small hole in the corner I'd never noticed before. Squirming purposefully, it squeezed its bulk through the gap with the gruesome squelch of a bratwurst being forced through a keyhole. A second later it was gone. A faint trail of slime was all that remained.

Standing there, adrenaline raging, I almost looked around to see if anyone else had observed the monstrosity. But this was my apartment and no one was there. Normally I wasn't any more squeamish than the next guy, but after this little encounter I could feel my pulse pounding in my temples like a runaway jackhammer. What was one supposed to do in this situation? As much as I wanted the creature the fuck out of my house, it wasn't like you could just go over and offer it an escort.

I randomly imagined a mouthful of Joe Meadows' massive teeth clamping down shinily on my arm and decided to go out for a while.

By the time I called the elevator and reached the ground floor I was mostly recovered. That was the thing about my fancy new mood implant, it tended to inspire resilience. So far at least.

Gazing out the lobby window at the late day's sunshine pooling on the sidewalk, I remembered with a start that tonight was the third Thursday of the month. On these occasions Buster, Mike and I typically met up at the Sacred Cow, a mediocre pub a few minutes' tunnel ride northwest of my place. They had the same drinks, the same food, and the same prices as everywhere else, but the location was roughly equidistant to our respective dwellings so it made sense. Finding that I was already ten minutes late, I loped toward the subway.

The three of us had next to nothing in common, other than our grudging servitude to Impulse

Dynamics. Buster and Mike had been at the company for long enough that there would be no point in them ever leaving. If they didn't die at their desks in an act of noble sacrifice, Impulse was resigned to send them a monthly pittance to assist with their dotage. I had only been there a few years but my skin was already beginning to bleach beige from the routine. I needed the job, though. There were millions of desperate fucks out there every day, just chomping at the bit to take your place for a few credits a week.

Nevertheless, I didn't mind these excursions too much. The guys weren't bad and it gave us all a chance to claim temporary refuge from whatever assorted crap was going on at the moment.

I spied them right away in our usual spot at the bar. There were some people at tables scattered around the restaurant area and everyone was conspicuously trying to ignore the pitiful music selection. About what you'd expect from a joint like this. As I came into range, Buster saw me first.

He leered casually at me. "Hey, buddy."

I nodded a greeting, just in time for him to elbow me playfully in the ribs.

"Check out that chick at the table to your left." He whispered it furtively.

I snuck a glance. Not bad, nice body but otherwise unremarkable. Back on our side of the scoreboard the good fellows had already racked up a couple beers apiece, with the empty bottles to prove it. Mike raised his chin in laconic acknowledgment.

Buster liked to go out mostly to check out the girls. He had an obese wife and a couple pudgy kids at home who didn't do anything for him in the eye candy department. Buster had enjoyed playing sports as a child, and when this failed to amount to anything, he took out his spite on the world by gaining the first two hundred pounds he could find. I liked looking at the scenery, too, but I had also decided after a rigorous mathematical analysis that talking to girls was not usually cost-effective.

You could tell Mike wanted to say something important. He was wiry and balding and had a thick mustache crouched malevolently above his lip. Mike was fond of conspiracy theories and I had a

hunch that would be what was coming. I wasn't wrong.

“Hey, Sam, what's up,” he began. “So I was telling Buster this already but you got to check it out. I read this article, by this guy Jack something. Ph.D. in Poly-Sci and the works. It's called 'The Great Media Experiment'. He says he has actual proof that the government is the one behind Population Control. That the whole mess is being planned out from the inside.”

Buster smirked a little and sipped his beer.

Mike immediately soldiered on. “It actually makes a lot of sense when you think about it. The Party needs to keep the War on Terror going in order to keep raising taxes. Population Control needs to keep bombing office buildings to maintain the War on Terror. It's an ideal arrangement.”

“What about the people who get killed,” Buster asked rhetorically. “You think the government would just do away with them, like that?”

“Sure.” Mike looked perfectly convinced. I was actually with him on that one. After all, there was a population crisis. I quickly ordered a beer to make up for lost time.

“Fine, but what evidence do you have that the Party is really actively involved?” Buster looked a little perturbed, possibly because he had had this same conversation dozens of times in the recent past.

“What evidence do you have that they're not?”

I chimed in to break the stalemate. “Well, we should probably go ahead and get government jobs then, just in case.” Good enough for a quick chuckle. I considered it a task well done on my part.

All in all, I wasn't sure where I stood. Statistically speaking, the results were inconclusive. It seemed to me that buildings were still going to get bombed either way, making it kind of a moot point.

This sort of vaguely political discussion went on for a while, replete with a spot of friendly ribbing about my recent adventures with the law. I didn't mind. I had downed a few more and was starting to feel pretty good again, relaxed even. That was, up until I happened to glance over at the nearest table.

Seated around the table was a family of four. Ostensibly they seemed like your average middle-class nuclear household, father, wife, two mid-sized standard issue brats. The guy was wearing a dignified overcoat and nice shoes and the woman had some kind of fringed shawl draped strategically over her shoulders. But something was wrong.

It was the hands. Instead of hands the father had these horrible prongs. Like if the bone in the forearm that splits apart hadn't come back together at the wrist and instead developed into two giant, tapered pincers. And it wasn't just him, it was all of them. They looked like a family of crabs trying to stage a serious drama about the human condition. What's more, the guy was holding his salad fork preposterously between those soft appendages like a lever. I could hear them chatting nonchalantly about the weather in Sea Shade.

Instantly I went from tranquil on the whole to highly agitated. Buster and Mike were now talking about work and I tensely waited for them to glance over. Eventually Mike did. I held my anticipation in check for what seemed like forever but his face didn't register anything out of the ordinary.

For a while, then, I tried to internally rationalize the situation down to something less tripped out. No dice. I could feel the chip trying to kick in, but for the moment reality had the upper hand. After a few more agonizing minutes I made some excuse about being tired and managed to slide out of there.

When I got my bearings again I was wandering aimlessly around the burned-out old financial district. Several hours had elapsed and I couldn't have said what I was doing there, exactly. I felt like my sense of time had gone on vacation. The whole area had been bombed to shit a few years ago and there was nothing much substantial left. Maybe a stray dog if you were lucky. The ruined buildings bristled up around me like rotten teeth as I walked fast down the cracked sidewalk. Could it be withdrawal? It was never this bad.

My treasonous mind unnecessarily conjured up the afterimage of what I'd seen at the Cow. I already knew what it was that bothered me so much. No doubt about it. The revolting pinkness of that guy's flabby claws reminded me of the fat worm thing in my apartment. They were the exact same color.

Out of nowhere I got hit by a sudden wave of hilarity. Maybe I should have taken a picture. Might have come in handy if I ever got too cheery and needed to bring things back into perspective.

After due consideration, I decided I was sick of whatever itinerant fulfillment I was searching for and went home. The mood stimulator had leveled things out a little and I was mostly just anxious to get some rest.

Seemed like only a few minutes later I woke to the screech of my buzzing phone. Instinctively I picked up, a second before my higher brain had the chance to do the smart thing and let it go. It turned out to be Amber from Human Resources. I checked the clock and it was still over an hour before I even had to be in. What did the company want with me this early?

In a deluded moment of optimism it occurred to me that maybe she was going to ask me out.

“Hello, Sam. How are you doing this morning?”

“I'm really not sure yet,” I replied truthfully.

“Well, that's just fantastic.” Short pause. “I'm afraid I was actually calling with some bad news.”

I listened attentively for there to be a point.

“I'm sure you know about the break-in at the office Wednesday night. Where all those purchase orders went missing.” Silence. “The thing is, Sam, we reviewed the videodiscs. You're on them.”

I stifled a gape at the sound of that, although she couldn't see me. “What?”

“The security cameras. They show the whole thing. I'm very sorry, Sam, but we're going to have to let you go. This is a rather egregious abuse of company policy and we clearly have no other choice in



the matter.”

I said nothing. I don't know if she expected me to flip out or what, but I couldn't do it. It didn't make any sense. I imagined hanging from a long rope, suspended over a great gulf, looking up to see her cutting the line. About to let me go. Why did they say it like that?

“Frankly, I wish I knew what got into you. You were always such a reliable employee. But let's just make this all easier on everyone, okay? Don't bother to come in to the office. We'll deposit your severance pay within two weeks.” Dead air. I could hear the static on the line rumbling portentously. “Sam?”

I hung up. What more was there to say, really?

My mind felt hazy and indistinct, half-liquefied. I sat on the edge of the bed for a few more blurry minutes. Then I started to become aware of the noise.

As best I can describe, it was a kind of hoarse mutter, a grating monotone punctuated by these awful slurping gurgles. The whole performance sounded like a professional demonstration of how to most effectively chew up and swallow your own tongue. Although the words themselves were indiscernible, I figured that was probably for the best.

More ominous still was the disconcerting fact I couldn't make out where the voice was coming from. It was either somewhere behind the wall or somewhere inside my head. There was no objective way to tell. Ultimately, I decided I didn't want to know. So I just got up and left.

Anyway, it felt like I had things to do.

Flash forward to the present. It's not pretty. Terrible dreams last night. I flexed my arms and a thousand buildings fell, but I didn't know why.

This morning I wake up in a ditch way out east of the city. I have a heavy backpack on and no memory of its contents. Also a flak jacket and hiking boots. Last time I checked I didn't even own that

shit.

I wearily note the fact I can still feel the mood regulator chugging along. My life might have abruptly turned into a surrealist's wet dream, but at least I could approach it without a negative attitude.

When I finally make it home in the late afternoon I can barely move. Just sit there in the heat and absorb a few rays of sunlight and smile. There's a small pistol in my right hip pocket and my legs feel like I ran five miles through wet cement.

The worst part is, I remember things. I mean remember from the inside. The headline with that photo today was bad enough, but somehow I have another perspective, one looking out from within the blasted foyer. With the hostages. Looking out at the barrels of all those guns. Pointed at me.

Clearly something has gone wrong. I thought about calling the cops, since they were the ones who got me into this damn mess. If I could just be persuasive enough, maybe, just maybe they'd take the fucking thing out of my wrist and let me go with a warning. Just so I could think straight again. No more capsules! I swear! I wanted it to be that easy. But the problem is, it wasn't very realistic.

I knew how it would go if I actually tried to make my case. Even under the best of circumstances I'd walk into the precinct and tell them some of this shit and never, ever get back out.

It is around this time that I resolve to go to the emergency room. Should have been obvious, really. My keys are already in my pocket and I have nowhere else to be. I immediately get up and head downstairs feeling motivated. Actually peering around for a change, it's a nice, warm summer day and the air smells fresh and clean. There's a pleasant breeze. I turn toward the direction of the subway tunnel entrance and start to –

Back home. I gasp for air as if coming up from under deep water. Only ten minutes have passed. I have a throbbing headache. I remember nothing, though I am too afraid to try again.

What happens now, I wonder fleetingly. No answer. My mind is busy hovering uselessly somewhere between giddy anticipation and full-on panic. At this point formulating a plan seems about

as likely as winning the lottery without buying a ticket.

Maybe I could call for help! The idea brings with it a gleeful rush of insight, almost clarity.

Anyone would do. All I need is someone on my side. Maybe Mike –

My gaze feverishly roves the room, but my phone is nowhere to be seen.

All of a sudden I find myself downtown for some reason. The setting sun slouches pinkly over the horizon like a fried flamingo egg. I am carrying a briefcase and the bitter reek of ammonia is on my clothes.

Shit is getting stranger by the minute. I don't know if people are looking at me because I'm crazy or if their constant looking is driving me over the edge. On a tangent, I picture Amber's flowing red hair, but it doesn't affect me much. All that feels like a past life.

When I was a kid my best friend got taken by the monsters. My father told me to keep a stiff upper lip. I knew they were out there all the same.

In my apartment again, but when I check the date it can't be right. There's shit around I don't recognize. For the record, a couple of those bug-looking things are on the wall. It's not them I'm worried about, though. Just a bug in the system, ha ha. My wrist hurts. I think it may be infected.

Cut to me standing outside at twilight with a dirty shovel raised above my head. The wind howls bleakly and the moon hangs like a sore over a nameless plain. I am halfway down in a plot of freshly dug earth. I don't want to know what I'm about to bury in this field but my mind has already calculated the size and shape of the hole. I –

– waking up somewhere hands smelling like gunpowder. Most of my shirt is a ragged tear and spots of what I desperately hope is dried mud. What the fuck is going on, really? I don't know what day it is but I have a feeling I won't be here for long. When I was a kid we used to –

POLICE REPORT – The body of Mr. Sam Hungerford, among several others, was uncovered this morning in the wreckage of the municipal courthouse in Sea Shade. Preliminary observation revealed head trauma as the likely cause of death. Identification was made via dental records as the victim's arms have not been located. While at first believed to be a casualty of the explosion, evidence later found in Mr. Hungerford's apartment and on the remains of his person makes it seem probable at this time that he played a role in the attack. We currently have no further information regarding possible accomplices or connections to existing groups such as Population Control, although our investigation continues. Examination of Mr. Hungerford's record reveals a recent drug-related infraction and subsequent firing from his job of four years, suggesting potential motives. The appropriate family members have been notified.

PRESS RELEASE – On behalf of our many customers and shareholders around the globe, Impulse Dynamics would like to sincerely apologize for a recent quality assurance failure leading to the contamination of a small group of our products. While it is unfortunately true that a single batch of infected chips were pressed in the United States, to the best of our knowledge none of these defective items ever reached the market. We are diligently investigating the source of the virus and actively cooperating with law enforcement in this matter. As valued members of the corporate family, please rest assured that we have already begun revamping our manufacturing procedures for optimum quality and security. Our money-back guarantee and commitment to your satisfaction remain in full effect. Simply return any product, for any reason, to your original point of purchase and you will promptly be issued a full refund.