

The headaches were getting worse, and the screeching alarm wasn't helping. Perhaps he should get one of those ones that played sweet melodies in the mornings. No, he would probably just sleep through that.

John pulled himself out of bed. Flakes of dried saliva crusted over his two day old beard. His sleeping wasn't going well, although whether the headaches were causing the insomnia, or the insomnia causing the headaches, he wasn't sure. The traffic outside his window almost certainly wasn't helping.

Lumbering over to the sink to start his daily routine was particularly odious today, although honestly it seemed particularly odious every day. It wasn't that the task itself was hard; his sink was only a few steps from his bed, but John could feel the new day starting, and the weight of that felt more and more taxing of late.

He picked up his toothbrush and ripped open his daily toothpaste pack, spraying grey flecks onto his fingers. As he pressed it onto the top of his brush, he wondered how everyone had the same amount of toothpaste, but different sized mouths. Mouths are all pretty close in size, he supposed, but still. The bitter taste filled his mouth as he scrubbed vigorously. It was allegedly refreshing mint, and it was definitely minty or something equally sharp, but nothing was really refreshing two minutes after waking up.

The clock on his wall glowed 0647. He was running out of time. The train left his stop at 0705, and unlike everything else about his workday, it was never late. Not bothering to rinse properly, he sat down at his table and ripped the foil off his breakfast. It looked like some sort of green mush on toast this morning, but you could never be one hundred percent sure.

"Food Schedule." The table flashed green and neon lettering began to scroll across the middle. Italian sun-dried tomato pesto on Parisian style garlic bread. Sure, maybe that's what it was. It could have said mushroom ravioli and he would have believed it.

"News," he called out, his mouth stuffed with food. The table flashed red. "News," he called out again, more discernibly. Bright words whirred across the table. John was only able to pick out the emboldened words. Great... Successful... Groundbreaking... Satisfied...

He shoved down the food and tried to will away his headache. It appeared the no matter how much one scrunches up their face, the pain persists. Stress headaches, his priest had told him. The priest had given him medication to diminish the throbbing, but it always made John feel dopey afterwards, and John hated that. It wasn't actually mind altering, but John was a little less himself whenever he was on the meds, and it wasn't like he felt all that much like himself to begin with.

0654. His suit was hanging by the door. Still zipping up his pants, he nudged open the front door with his shoulder. He pulled the ID card from the dock just before the door closed behind him, killing all the power to his apartment. It was for efficiency, but it also notified the local minister that you had left your apartment.

John rushed down the hallway toward the elevator pod, pausing only for a second to notice the moving images on the wall tapestries. It was fascinating, the level of complexity the imagery formed by the tiny LED lights woven into the fabric could be. This apartment complex was among the nicest in the city, and John felt it his responsibility to appreciate the finer details. As always when he looked at it, he briefly contemplated the irony that for one to be assigned to this type of luxurious residential sector, they had to be the type of soulless automaton who excelled at repetitive paperwork in a grey cubicle. There was no doubt he fit that title these days. He had long given up fantasies as a career in the creative sector. Those jobs were impossible to get, and attainable had always been such an attractive vocational quality.

The doors of the elevator swung open as he approached, and without breaking his stride, he

leaped into the elevator shaft. The rush of air filled John's ears as he dropped the two hundred and forty three stories to the ground level. A mix of air cushions and magnetic manipulation slowed his fall and steered him clear of other elevator users as he neared the main floor. He hit the ground running, images of missing his train vivid in his mind. If he missed his scheduled train, he would not likely get a spot on another until after rush hour. Despite the importance of being timely, John could not force himself to wake up a few minutes earlier. He had never felt particularly well rested in the mornings, even before his recent bouts of trouble with his sleep. There was something about the warmth of a blanket that made all of life's concerns and worries secondary.

The bright light blasted his eyes as he stepped out, forcing him to squint and stare at the ground as he walked. The street lamps were set to morning glow, and the sheer brilliance stole every shadow from the street. As he hurried along the sidewalk, he saw words written on each paved slat. Energy, Productive, Dynamic, Proficient, Active. This was new, but it fit with the theme. This was all part of the city's new efficiency initiative. The goal of the lights was to bring everyone to their peak levels of consciousness, driving away the ghosts of sleep that so many carry around with them in the mornings, and the power words on the ground were meant to bring focus toward productive behaviours. It was all heavily researched and tested in the municipal laboratories, and, well, you can't argue with science.

0703. The train was just pulling into the station as John fumbled with his ID card to log into the station. He hastily swiped it and pushed through the turnstile. Bodies of all shapes and sizes jostled him as he hurtled through the crowd. The train doors slammed shut behind him, barely missing the back of his shirt.

He collapsed down onto the bench, gasping in air. No matter what he did in the mornings, he was always racing to the last minute. He just didn't get morning people.

John often went into a kind of meditative trance when he rode the metro, and today was no different. People came onto the train. People shuffled about looking uncomfortable and disinterested. People attempted to look busy, some with the news and some playing games, but all of them just trying not to look awkward doing nothing. So many unique people, all doing one uniform routine.

John was not exempt from this routine. He picked up his tablet and held down the on button. The GloboTech logo flashed across the screen, before a cute animation of a child playing with a dog repeated over and over until the operating system finally came up.

Three new messages. One from a colleague about how his new meds were really helping with his concentration. One from a colleague about some new literature he had gotten from his church. The last was from his boss, a tall woman with an annoying habit of micromanagement, reminding him for the third time in as many days about a memo he had sent out regarding organizing the reports by alphabetization as opposed to by birth date. John looked up. Two stops had passed. He needed something else to kill time.

He pulled up a document Father Whelan had sent him on codes of ethics. If this wouldn't cure his insomnia, the priest had joked, nothing would. He liked that the Father made jokes. John had gone through a number of churches before, but none had seemed a good fit. The clergy took their status very seriously, and too often in John's mind, they confused being aloft with being aloof. John smiled to himself. He liked word play.

"Please stand clear of the doors." The announcer's voice had that perfect tone of calm; the one that infuriates you for absolutely no reason. John had constructed a long and complicated backstory for the announcer, imagining she lived in a cage far beneath the metro, and her only communication with the world was through her subway announcements. Some days she was passive aggressive, where she tormented the subway patrons with calculated calm. Sometimes she was cold and alone, only allowed to read that one sentence, so she relayed it in a tone so unearthly you just felt everything was not all right. Today, she was a bitch. She had almost made him miss his stop with his daydreaming of her.

A handful of nearly identical coffee shops, dry cleaners, and drug stores blurred together as he raced through the tunnels to get to morning services. He didn't really consider himself a particularly devout man, although he would admit there were moments, but being late for prayers irked him. There was his seat waiting for him, and if someone else came early and took it, the whole morning would be off. Everything was just more comfortable when it followed routine, religion doubly so.

Stepping out of the underground mall and into Father Whelan's Second Church of Pluralistic Worship, John knew he had stepped into a different world. The pillars and ramparts were warm colours, a flowing mix of purple and red, and the benches had thick cushions on them. It had a sensual feel to it. There was a fountain at the entrance way for washing your hands before entering the sanctuary. Water spewed from the mouth of a small horned gargoyle head, only to be caught by the massive maw of some kind of beast bursting forth from the earth, all distinguishing features buried beneath the floor, its forked tongue snaking up to savour the stream impatiently.

There was a singular beauty in how the water ran down the tongue, touching nothing else before disappearing down into the darkness beneath, not because of any symbolic meaning necessarily, simply the aesthetics of it. The rushing sound the water made always whisked him away, just for a moment, to a place he instinctively felt at home and serene, but had no details to speak of.

Rinsing his hands off quickly, John walked towards the front of the room. The absence of walls in the cavernous room pressed in on John, slowing his movement to a crawl. Cathedrals were the only structures that were allowed to have such vast spaces. Most buildings were limited to forty by sixty feet for their meeting rooms, as studies showed that larger spaces had a tendency to make people feel separated from the group.

His seat was waiting for him in the second row. There was something magical about the second row of a packed chapel. You had an excellent vantage point of the pulpit, but you remained an unremarkable ripple in the sea of grey uniforms. Sitting at the front placed a spotlight on you, as did positioning yourself inches from the entrance, despite all efforts to the contrary. He felt the tension leaving his muscles as he nestled into the plush fabric, a style of comfort so absent in all other aspects of his life.

Father Whelan stepped out from behind a curtain at the left of the stage and marched with purpose and dignity towards the pulpit, his gait measured and deliberate. His posture introduced him better than any emcee, conveying strength, compassion, and wealth of experience, while simultaneously expressing a salt of the earth approachability. He cleared his throat to indicate to the room he wished it to begin, but it was entirely for show, as silence had enveloped the room as soon as he appeared.

"Hey." The casual greeting was absurd coming from a man of such dignity, and it was that absurdity that caused everyone to break out in a smile. The tension inherent in priestly sermons seemed to be alien to the church of the 98th district.

"It is a tremendous honor for me to stand before you today and impart what little wisdom I have onto you. I feel so blessed." The speech began the same way every time, a soft mantra to ease them in. "Today, I am going to talk to you about something very important. No, not God. Not civil responsibility. Today, I am going to talk to you about bags." Pause. "This morning, you came in with a giant bag. You came with a bag full of worries. You came with a bag full of problems. You came with a bag full of discontent. By now, I am sure you realize I am not talking about a physical bag, unless you are Bob over there in the back, who appears to be searching frantically for something. Bob, it was a metaphor. It's ok.

"So every day, you are carrying around this massive sack with you, and it's weighing on you. It's causing you to stoop under its weight. To bend your knees. Almost to collapse. We have been carrying around this sack for so long that it has begun to burst at the seams. And what happens when

you try to add things to a bag that's completely full? That's right. It falls out. Or it breaks all at once. Either way, the one thing it won't do is it won't go into the bag. So here we are, all day, crushed under the weight of our bags, spilling our negativity all around us. And we look around, and see ourselves: weak, burdened and damaging the world around us. And then we see everyone else, always after we have first stared at ourselves, and they are strong, motivated, purposeful. And we feel alone. And we feel separated." His voice rose and fell, a melody with no notes, but a symphony nonetheless. "Well, let me tell you that we all have bags. We are all spilling them. And nothing unites us more than how alone they make us feel.

"So you have bags. Great. You knew this already, you just didn't have my clever metaphor. So now what? How do we get rid of them? How do we fix them? Well let me tell you. I... I have no idea.

"I struggled with this speech. I wanted to get to this point, and give you the magic words to make it all better. I looked up videos and articles on how others handled this type of thing in their speeches. I checked up gurus and psychologists. It seems everyone has their own special cure. Breathe deeply and meditate. Focus on the positive. Remember, it's all in your head. Re-organize your life. So many different solutions, but one thing is always the same. They are always nonsense, some feel good garbage to make you feel like the preacher is brilliant, but solves nothing. And when it inevitably fails, you blame yourself, and feel even worse.

"The problem is, it's not all in your head. Not really. You really do have stuff going on in your life, and it's not always pleasant. Everyone else just is so wrapped up in their own problems that when you share it with anyone, they tell you to stop having such negative thoughts, because actually listening and working through your issues is too onerous when their own problems are already crushing them. They imagine you can just will away your worries while they themselves have never been able to do the same.

"So, no, I don't know how to fix you, or myself for that matter. I can't fix us; we're not broken. We're human, and while that may still be unpleasant at times, it's not the same thing. But I do know how to be honest, and I am pretty sure our lack of honesty with each other is how we got in this whole mess in the first place. Things in our lives are not always fine, and that's ok.

"So maybe I do have some magic words, after all. Just be honest with each other. Share your pains and your troubles. If you don't have time for someone else's issues, just tell them that. It's better than making them feel worse for telling you. Perhaps share their burden with them, and let them share yours with you. Form this connection with as many people as you can.

"There was one speech I looked up that did have some useful advice. After going through all the people who make it their career to tell you how to live, I stumbled across one clip of a physics professor, explaining something called the distributive weight property. The short version is that when two people lift an object, they can lift significantly more weight than either can on their own. We see this every time we help a friend carry heavy furniture. There is no way we could carry even half the weight of that furniture by ourselves, yet together the task becomes easy. We know already that the physical world mirrors the spiritual world. So let's try this. Take all of your sacks, and put them together in one giant basket. Have everyone grab on, and lift it as a unit. Don't do this tomorrow, or when you find a good group to do it with. You never will. Do this today, with whoever you can find. I won't promise results, but I can tell you it works for me. Even now, as I stand here unloading my worries, my frustrations, and my pains, I feel better. Did all my troubles disappear? No. They are all still there. But with you holding them up for me, I can finally take a moment to breathe, and let me tell you, it feels, well, it feels pretty damn nice."

There was a pause before the audience erupted in applause. This was why John came. The sermons were powerful and well worded, but this moment, this single tear in the façade of so many

stony faced citizens, this is what brought him. For six seconds a day, he was unmasked, naked. It was wonderful.

The change in the room following the applause was instantaneous. The service was over, and everyone needed to get to work. Everyone stood up from their seats, turned left, and marched out. John would have liked to linger a moment longer, but the gentle insistence of the moving crowd pressed him out the door.

It was only a three minute walk from the church to the Ministry of the Interior, where John worked, and John didn't delay. Being at work was easy; monotonous in a kind of hypnotic way. Walking to work was much more stressful. He could almost feel the quicksand pulling at his feet with every step, its insistent grasp pleading with him to slow down and postpone life for just one more moment. Everyone talked about how work was a grind, but he often wondered whether most people felt like he did, or if it was just lip service.

He couldn't imagine everyone going through life feeling like he did, soldiering on with no real answer to why he was bothering. He wasn't sad exactly. Not really numb either. The best word he could find to describe himself was bored, but that wasn't really it either. He imagined that even if other people felt like him sometimes, no one was thinking about how they felt as often as him, and that's what set him apart from the rest. What a wonderful fucking way to be special.

Turning the corner, his office seemed to stand out among the buildings around it, although in truth it was exactly the same: big, grey, and square. The only distinguishing factor was two gigantic wooden doors in the front, with the words "God is Freedom" emblazoned across the top. As he got closer, he could see smaller, human-sized doors built into the base of the show doors that people could actually use.