

"Fuck!"

It came from the den. Later I'd learn that it had been preceded by a much quieter, "Oh fuck. Oh-"

My first thought was that it had broken. I was going to spend a lot of time, over the next five years, wishing that I'd been right about that.

He burst into the room, crunching the door hinges and smacking the handle deep into the plaster. He nearly fell over trying to stop. I didn't say anything, just stared.

"391! He was on the train this morning! He was one of the victims!" He stared too. We just stared. "*Look it up!*"

I didn't have to. An electric buzz, as much like actual pain as excitement, jumped from my stomach to my head. I didn't have all our test-cases memorised yet, but Mr 391 I did know: EXPLODED. He was one of the reasons I was sure it wasn't working - his prediction was a joke. He saw I wasn't looking it up, saw me looking at him, and knew I knew, but said it all the same:

"*It fucking works.*"

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We were eating.

"Okay, well, it's *on* now." I munched a chip.

"Yeah."

"I mean, it's *on*." I pointed a chip at him for emphasis.

"Yeah."

"I'm just-"

"*I get that it is on.*"

"Okay." I put my chips down.

I fixed myself a drink.

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He came into my office again, calmly this time, through the broken door. My office, his house. We left all the doors open that afternoon, and just walked around doing small, unimportant things, occasionally meeting in the corridors of his big, dusty old house and swapping new thoughts.

"What's the latest count? How many others died?"

"Wikipedia has a hundred now." I told him, underplaying it a little. "Some places have two." They all had two.

"Christ. From one bomb?"

"They think it was a few, and it was on the subway, so..."

"Yeah. Christ." He slouched against the wall and looked up at the cracked ceiling. "This isn't quite how I imagined it working."

"You know we still have to publish our results, right? I mean, that was the point of no return, right there."

"Yeah, yeah, I know. It's just-" He looked at me. "It's going to look like we're profiting off of this."

I laughed, then met his eyes. "It's going to look like we're *profiting* from it? Pete, it's going

to look like we *did* it. You don't seem to realise how sceptical people are going to be about something like this. You're the only person in the world who has any idea how this box works, and to the rest of us it looks a hell of a lot like a hoax. And when some small-minded prick with a bag of pipe bombs decided commuters were responsible for all the world's problems this morning, it became the most vicious hoax in history. We're going to have protesters on your lawn around the clock, we're going to get ripped to shreds in the press, we're going to be hounded by cameras. We're going to get *mail bombs*, Pete." I sat down, and lowered my voice. "They're gonna try and kill us. Nobody knows yet, but I promise you that at some point in the next eighteen hours, someone Googling the victim names is going to find our prediction list and our lives as they stand will be over." I was realising most of this as I said it. I felt sick. We were fucked.

"We're fucked, aren't we?"

"We're not fucked." I thought about it. We were definitely fucked. "No, we're not fucked."

He shook his head. "We're so fucked."

I sighed. We were so, so fucked.

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"I don't, you know," he said suddenly, as we boxed up the prototype. I frowned.

"What?"

"Have any idea how it works. I'm the same as anyone else, except I know it does."

"You *made* it, Pete. I just did your accounts."

"I didn't really. I discovered it. If it had done what I built it to do, if it had been the thing we were trying to make, if it had been the Death Clock-

"I told you we couldn't call it that."

"-then I would have made it. But you can't make something like this, it's out there waiting to be found."

"Well, I certainly hope you *can* make it. Because we're going to need a job fucking lot of them."

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"You know, this is the best possible way it could have happened."

"What the hell?" I was actually shocked.

"No, I mean, to prove it. You couldn't ask for a more conclusive test." He put up a hand to silence me, "I know, I know loads of people are going to think we blew up a train to sell a box, but this is still going to convince more people than we ever dreamed we would. Your investor friends aren't going to think we blew up Los Angeles, they're going to think it works."

"They're not going to like the publicity."

"They don't have to, yet. No-one has to know they're investing, and they all know that by the time they come to sell them, the whole world will realise they work." I was the business brain of the operation, but Pete wasn't an idiot. I knew it from the moment he said '391': this would *make* us.

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"Did you tell Jen yet?"

"What? Yeah, of course! You didn't tell Cath?"

"Not yet." Honestly, it had only just occurred to me.

"Well why the hell not? You've got to tell her, dude." I hate it when he calls me dude.

"I just- how do you say it? How did *you* say it?"

"I said 'Jen, it works,' same as I said to you."

"Actually you said '*It fucking works!*'," I mocked, in my best nasal geek voice, "But you told

her how we know?"

"Yeah."

"Was she freaked out?"

"Of course. Aren't you?"

"I'm- I've been-" I came clean. "I feel sick. I've been feeling sick for three hours now."

He looked straight at me; I don't talk like that often. "You've got to tell her. Jen'll tell her, and she'll tell her when I told her. You know what they're like, women just find a way to get times into conversations."

"I can't say I'd noticed."

"Well, they do."

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I walked into the den. Pete was tinkering again, already. I set his coffee down and took a sip of mine.

"Thanks."

I ignored him. "Here's what we do. You spend the rest of the night packing all this away, everything you need. I hire a van. You hire a hangar. I hire an agent. You draw me up a list of the components that went into the latest prototype - not the ones you *think* you'll need for the new improved version, I know you. The components for *this* one. I'll give the investors the heads up before the news breaks, and tell them we need the first payment by noon tomorrow. You call every engineer friend you trust and get them on board. Write out a step-by-step assembly guide an idiot could follow in the van on the way, then make sure we don't hire any idiots to follow it. I order us a new pair of phones, we throw these ones away, and we give the new numbers to *no-one* but Cath and Jen unless I say. We disappear. I can sort out accommodation once we're out of here, and a few months down the line we can buy a new place, but right now we have to get as many of these things built and making predictions as possible. The more predictions they make, the more get proved right, the fewer mail bombs we get." I sipped. "What's that?" He was writing something.

"It's a step-by-step assembly guide an idiot could follow." He put it on a thin pile.

"What are those?"

"Well," he leafed through them, "this one's a component list for the prototype, this one's a map to the hangar we've hired, these are the resumés of the three most expensive agents I could find, this one's a printout of a receipt for two iPhones, this one's a fax from the Hyatt confirming our reservation, and these are the keys to our new van." He tossed them to me. I looked around the room, I guess for the first time. It was full of neatly packed boxes.

"What do I do at this company again?"

"It's never really been clear to me." He took a sip of his coffee and went back to writing.

"Call the investors!" he shouted after me as I left, forgetting my mug.

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"We're not going to get killed by a mail bomb, you know," he said in the van on the way up. It was dark, I was driving, which meant the radio stayed off. "We know that much. Whatever happens with this, it won't kill us. I'm an aneurysm and you're a heart-attack, those were the first two tests we ever ran."

"Yeah." I'd been thinking about that a lot since we discovered the box really worked. I wondered what it would feel like. "Christ, what about Cath and Jen?" I'd refused to let either of them be tested.

"We'll have them take it, we have to now." They were coming up tomorrow. The thought of it made me queasy.

"No," I said suddenly. "No. I don't want it hanging over them," then, feeling the familiar emotional crunch of stepping on Pete's toes when it came to Jen, "Not Cath, anyway."

"We have to."

"You think about it, don't you? What it's going to feel like? Come on, we don't want that for them." He stared at the wing-mirror. "If I looked through your browser cache, I'd find a bunch of aneurysm sites, right?"

"No." He looked back at the road. We sat in silence for a few minutes, the blank road purring beneath us as a half-tunnel of arched black trees flashed by either side. "I cleared it."

I looked away from the road for the briefest moment. He was smiling.

2

So that was that day. I persuaded Cath not to take the test, and Jen didn't need persuading: she said over her dead body, and I said we probably wouldn't bother if she was already dead, and she said good, and updated her position to "Not *even* over my dead body." In all our discussions that night, I don't think Pete or I considered that they'd have a say in it themselves.

But Cath did take it, years later, and it was the beginning of the end.

We had a few good years before that. I'd thought the heat would die down once everyone realised the machine truly worked, but I couldn't have been more wrong. Once it became clear just how reliable the predictions were, a huge number of people decided the machine itself was *causing* the deaths. And after we went into hiding that night, we never came out.

We knew fairly early on, I think, that we wanted nothing more to do with the device. We'd only started this company to get rich, and there seemed little doubt we'd achieved that. We thrashed out a deal that would net us a huge lump sum, then continue to pay out in royalties no matter what people did with our technology, and sold the rights that first week. We became the elusive guys who just made this inexplicable thing and disappeared, which of course only added to the romance and public fascination with our little box. It wasn't until much later that Pete's scientific curiosity took hold again, and for those intervening years he was as happy as us to let the world scratch its head at what we'd done, even as it wrote out our cheques.

We each changed hair colour at least once, we went by fake names (I was Chris, Pete was Jason, Cath was Carol and Jen insisted on being Cath, confusing and irritating us all), we only did interviews by e-mail and IM, and we took turns picking the next country to spend a month in. The genius of it was that we'd essentially made our millions by creating something utterly useless. It didn't *help* to know how you would die, precisely because the machine was so accurate - you couldn't avoid it even when you knew it was coming.

Well, not entirely useless. You couldn't avoid the death it predicted, but it was very possible that you'd avoided other deaths simply by consulting the machine. The way Pete explained it to interviewers was this:

Say you're a clumsy skydiver. One day you're going to screw your parachute up and fall to your death. But the machine won't tell you that, because then you'd stop skydiving and it wouldn't come true. Instead, the machine tells you you'll die of a heart-attack. You decide to take it easy on the high-stress sports, preferring that your inevitable demise be later rather than sooner, and you live twenty years longer than you would have if you'd never taken the test.

For an electrical engineer, Pete was suspiciously good at marketing. I maintain that it would

have been cheaper to produce an empty box with "Don't skydive" written on the side - and usually say so at that point in the interview - but the world seems to prefer his device.

It gets a little more complicated if you're not a clumsy skydiver, of course, but on the whole the machine extends peoples lives by giving them the chance to stave off their fate for as long as possible - and in the process, miraculously avoiding the many others that ought to have claimed them along the way. None of the deaths it predicts are avoidable, but almost all of them are postponable. *Almost*.

That's why we never felt particularly bad about what we'd done, no matter how much pain and misery it seemed to cause, no matter how many times the police intercepted anthrax and explosives addressed to the old manor. I found those more *offensive* than anything. It's a matter of public record that Pete and are not scheduled to die from an explosion or a disease, so the authors of these assassination attempts must have known their efforts will only ever hurt innocent people.

In between the people whose lives we saved and the people whose lives we ruined, we got a pretty bizarre set of responses to our mysterious black box - co-licensed and manufactured by over three hundred companies worldwide, to date. A lot of people seemed to find the suggestion of inevitability incredibly offensive, and tried to do everything they could to defy it.

In some cases, avoiding death became secondary to disproving the machine: one man gashed his wrists to disprove a slip that told him he'd die of AIDS. He survived, of course - he'd just received his prediction from a machine in a GP's office, so there was help on hand. But he'd used an unsterilised scalpel from a nearby dolly, and with a grim predictability that quickly becomes familiar to anyone who follows special prediction cases, he contracted the virus from that.

Others took the fatality of it all as an excuse for hedonism, either because the manner of their death wasn't related to their passions, or precisely because it was. If it's going to kill you anyway you'd be mad to abstain, went the logic. Both types tended to die quickly. That caused some public concern, but I hardly thought the machine could be blamed for the live fast/die young correlation. Obviously those that overindulged in the vices that were to kill them died from them quickly - even *they* must have seen that coming.

It was the former group that suffered a stranger fate: their heart-attacks, tumors and cancer struck quickly, as if eager to get their kill in before the toll of that lifestyle snatched it from them and proved the machine wrong. It looked, in other words, like the machine was killing to prove itself right. Mind you, all statistical anomalies look suspicious if you take them in isolation. That was a tiny group - reckless men with bad habits didn't get slips saying 'NATURAL CAUSES' often.

For the most part, it was just like each of us had a new medical condition, and we were all hypochondriac about it. Even me. I, like the millions of HEART-ATTACKs out there, never touched red meat again, drank only in moderation, took light, regular exercise and simply left the room if anyone started arguing or stressful decisions needed to be made.

I'd even heard that some particularly ghoulish socialites held parties at which guests were obliged to wear their slips like name-tags, using the nature of their demise as a conversation-starter. I never went to one, but a part of me felt like they had the right idea: you can't take this cruel cosmic joke seriously, this blackest of humour, this mockery of fate. The only reasonable response to it is to go up to a stranger and say "Oh, hey, Megaloblastic Anemia? I hear that one's a bitch."

We could laugh about it, and we could forget it, and we did - lots of both. But it encroached on all our quiet moments - we felt infected. The prediction made it as if our death had already taken root in our bodies, and it was impossible not to visualise. Memories of health infomercial graphics haunted me, phong-shaded fat congealing in my arteries and constricting my bloodflow. I could put it to the back of my mind, always, but never entirely out.

The traveling was my idea. I never really knew what to do with the money, after working so long in the pursuit of it. Buying anything extravagant - helicopters, hotels, heroin - seemed to involve an awful lot of effort, and I can't honestly say that the only thing stopping me from buying these things before had been a lack of funds. I don't want them. I don't *want* anything, much, just a little safety.

I thought about giving it all to charity - there was even a dedicated one to helping people escape their machine-determined fate, the futility of which made me gape - but I knew I'd regret it. I haven't done many generous things in my life, and they've all made me feel terrible. In the end I did give a chunk of it to BrainHelp, a charity devoted to helping the survivors of aneurysms, because it was close enough to home to mean something to me, and useless enough to Pete not to be personally motivated.

But travel was my way of escaping that contentment, fleeing the realisation that we had nowhere else to go in life. We would, instead, go to the places we hadn't yet been. It was one of my better ideas, except for the part where it nearly kills my girlfriend.

3

I begged her not to do it. Well, pleaded. Okay, openly disapproved. A Thai taxi had smashed into our flimsy tuk-tuk on the reeking streets of Bangkok. I, she argued, had been smugly safe in the knowledge that it wasn't going to kill me as we tumbled out onto the sidewalk, while she had been freaking out. I tried to tell her that it wasn't like that, that when something actually *happens* all rational thought about predictions flies from your head, but either she didn't believe me or she didn't care. She was wild, she just had to know.

I should have been a real man about it and stopped her. Or a good man, and supported her. But instead I was just a man about it, which meant that I whined, chided and made her feel bad about herself without actually helping in any way. She'd come to expect nothing more.

We used the original prototype for it, still under a tarpaulin in that first hangar, and everything we did echoed. Pete and Jen came along for moral support. She replaced the needle with its fresh tube of claret attached, and we waited for the smooth hum of the printout.

She stood up, took it, looked at it and looked away - almost in one motion. I didn't notice her hand tremble as she passed it to me, but the tip of the slip of paper quivered delicately, giving her away. I looked up at her.

I took it. I read it. It was one word.

I started to sob.

The machine doesn't tell you *when* you're going to die, I'd corrected a hundred interviewers

about that. But in this case it had. In this one case, it had done exactly what we originally designed it to do: give an ETD.

We both knew, at the moment each of us saw it, even over the simple horror of that awful word, that it meant nine months at the most. We both knew that it would rend us apart, that we'd never be that close again. Closer in other ways, sure, but not like this, not now that we knew I was going to kill her. Which meant we must have already set the wheels in motion, and we had nine months, maybe less. LABOUR. It stared back at us innocently until Cath made me throw the slip away, like it had just wandered out of a perfectly harmless sentence about union disputes. I wanted so badly to be involved in a union dispute right then, for that to be my biggest problem, for that to be what labour meant to me.

I wanted to recall all the machines and tell Pete to redesign them to print in lower case, or Latin, or pictograms, or anything but that giant glaring word burning its way through the bin and my eyelids. *Why all caps, Pete?* Was that some kind of sick Terry Pratchett reference? But more than anything I wanted to hold her, and I just, *just* couldn't. I couldn't.

I did it anyway. Standing up was like controlling a crane, and she felt cold, tiny, bony against my chest. I'm a weak, mean, small man, and so is Pete - he told me so. But the one thing he and I can do, and I think it's the reason we became friends, the reason we started this company, is the impossible. If there's a good enough reason to do it, we just do it. In my case that was standing up and putting out my arms, and it was the hardest thing I've ever had to do, but goddamn it I had her now and I wasn't letting her go for- minutes, at any rate.

I looked at the machine over her shoulder as my wet red face pressed against her smooth warm cheek, and wondered what Pete's reason had been.

4

It killed him, in the end. I could never understand it, but those seven months - we didn't get the full nine, and I was almost glad by the end - hit Pete every bit as hard as they hit us. It was the first time that what we'd done really got to him. He *loathed* the machines, smashed that original prototype - valued at six and a half million dollars on our insurance paperwork - with a crowbar while drunk one night. Have you ever tried hitting anything with a crowbar? They're fucking heavy. Pete's a geek, but that thing was dust when I found it. I was angry then, but only because I hadn't realised how bad he'd gotten.

That was when he went back to work. He was obsessed with the idea of 'fixing it'. We'd set out to tell people how long they had to live, and by virtue of the now-famous TILT chip - intended to take into account probabilistic factors relating to your lifestyle that might increase the chances of accidental death - we'd ended up spitting out a horrible piece of information that haunted the user for the rest of his and his family's life. At the time we'd thought its popularity meant it was a success, but Pete was right: we'd failed utterly, we'd created a horrible, horrible thing. *He'd* created it. I only got into the habit of taking some of the credit after it had soured into blame.

The TILT chip was the problem. It didn't stand for anything, by the way - Pete just named it in all-caps because he was really pleased with it at the time. He was like a little kid once you got him hard-coding - it was all I could do to persuade him to leave off the exclamation mark he insisted it deserved. We both loved telling interviewers that story.

He'd spent years, literally years, working on the algorithm that would use actuarial data and hugely sophisticated conditional probabilities to get a rough idea of how likely people's stupid habits were to kill them, and when he'd finally done it, he discovered something odd. Actually, *I* discovered something odd. If he's going to call it a discovery rather than an invention, then I really can take some of the credit. It was me who, through incompetence rather than the spirit of experimentation, first tried using the machine without entering any data. And instead of a ballpark life expectancy figure, I got "48 45 41 52 54 2d 41 54 54 41 43 4b". Which, Pete reliably informed me, an extraordinary expression on his face I've never seen before or since, translated to "HEART-ATTACK".

The truth was, it didn't even really need the blood sample - we just kept that part in so that people would take it seriously, and to drive up the manufacturing costs to something investors would believe. For the same reason we insisted that all connectors be made of solid 24-carat gold when any old crap from Radio Shack would have worked, and there was a whole circuit full of wildly expensive and important-looking components in there that wasn't even hooked up to the live elements of the machine.

A few technical journals had picked up on that, but no-one dared try removing them. You could see where the *ordo Deus Ex Machina* guys were coming from, really: that hard nugget of inescapable truth just came down a wire, almost in our language, and not even its creator knew why. You could also see why Pete was so pleased with himself, and you could even see, years later, after millions of morbid projections proved true, why he was so wretched.

The problem, he suddenly announced once he stopped drinking, was the accuracy. He'd made it far, far too good. You didn't actually *want* a machine that was always right, the machine you really wanted was one that was always wrong. Wrong because you were able to *avoid* the death it predicted, the one you would otherwise have succumbed to, and live happily ever after.

A bad news machine that can't be defied is an inherently unmarketable idea, he told me, trying to speak my language. I decided not to get out my black AmEx card to demonstrate just *how* marketable it had been. So he started work on a spec for the machine's nemesis, the cure, the Final Solution to death itself; what he called Project Idiot.

I would have stopped him, should have, and God damn me for not doing it, but I was just grateful for the distraction. Something to think about other than the ways in which Cath's ever-growing bulge might rip her apart, and how it would make me feel about our daughter, if she survived.

He couldn't do it. He had a dozen brilliant ideas, but it just couldn't be done. The TILT chip defied him with the same silent, sinister smugness it defied those who tried to prove it wrong. He couldn't recreate it, he couldn't modify it, and he couldn't trick it. He discovered that it wasn't even using his actuarial data to make the predictions, it had just incorrectly surmised our purpose in entering them, and pulled the result it imagined we were after from nowhere.

My explanation was that it was quantum, the perfect catch-all for the apparently impossible. But Pete kept saying something over and over to me that to this day I don't quite get: "It's a function of the future," he said, "not the past." He said it didn't matter what he did to it before it was built, because its predictions were somehow independent of anything that had already happened. I don't know, but he kept saying it.

So it was the future he tinkered with, and he was sure one of his tricks would work. He became fixated on the moment when the patient actually reads his slip: if he takes the test

but never reads it, it will say something different to if he'd taken it and read it as normal. The ink doesn't change, it will *always* have said something different - it was the machine's most uncanny and unsettling ability: knowing with total certainty what you will do in response to its prediction.

He talked to a loose society of machine fanatics who kept their unread predictions curled up in tiny silver pendants around their necks, to be opened and read in emergencies to find out if they're about to die. No help. Eventually he built a full prototype of a machine that would e-mail the result to a server in Wyoming that was hooked up to a Geiger counter, and would send the result onto the patient's e-mail address only if it registered a radioactive decay within a second of receiving it, and scrub the data from its hard drives if not.

He needed a way of getting the information to the patient without the machine knowing whether it would or not, but every time he tested it it produced the same result as the existing machines. Schrodinger's Idiot, he called that one. He'd decided the physics students who owned the machine in Wyoming were going to get drunk one night and mail out everyone's results, which he was sure they were recording despite his instructions, and he'd been planning to drive out there and do I don't know what the next morning. The morning after I found him.

He was slumped absurdly over his desk. I always knew it would be me doing this. I set our coffees down and looked at the clock. Time of death, 22.25 - or earlier. I'd pictured him with a soldering iron in hand when I'd played this out in my mind before, hundreds of times, but as I gently lifted his cold, curly-haired head off the bench I saw that it was papers he'd been working on. Printouts from his CAD software, scribbled on in his trademark green biro. I couldn't make them out then, but I looked later with clearer eyes, and I liked them so much I had them framed.

I never picked up much engineering savvy from Pete - it's not the kind of knowledge that transfers by osmosis - but his margin notes made it plain enough. He'd designed The Idiot, and it would have worked. It had a lookup table of the most common causes of death and it simply discarded the blood sample and picked one at random, weighted towards the most common. It would be wrong, again and again, and even when it was right, it would be avoidable. The Idiot, had he made it, would have exceeded its spec as dramatically as the original machine. I could only think of one way to make it stupider, and I knew Pete always got a kick out of my terrible ideas, so before framing it I wrote "Don't skydive" on the side.

5

Lisa, we called her. Oh, yeah, she was fine - we knew she would be. We took a blood sample in the second trimester and had it tested: she's going to die of Emphysema, so unless she'd been bumming smokes off the placenta in there, we were in the clear. She and I.

She was going to be an interesting case, actually - it's not something that happens quickly, Emphysema, so I'll be intrigued to see how I fail *this* woman so utterly that I end up repeatedly exposing her to a toxic gas over the course of enough years that it ultimately destroys her lungs and kills her. Am I just going to forget to tell her, for her entire life, "Oh, and don't smoke"? You have to wonder.

I'm already overcompensating - I actually hit a guy last week for pulling out a cigarette at a housewarming party I was hosting. At Pete's old place, my old office, the place where it started - he'd left it to Jen, but she'd given it to me when she left the country. She didn't

ask for any money and I didn't offer any - Jen and I had a double-share each now, so it made no difference to either of us. We hardly talked, anyway. Tragedy doesn't bring people together, who started that bullshit? It's like nitro fucking glycerin.

"Does anyone have a light?" he said.

"No, but I have a... lights out... sandwich?" I almost said, before realising how amazingly lame it was. I'd already hit him by then, too, so I think the point had been made. It was almost a reflex.

I've been steadily losing it for a year now. I should come up with a more peaceful solution, like "Actually I'd rather you smoked outside. *In Kazakhstan.*" But I don't think it's going to come up again, not now.

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I was working in my old office when it happened, the cot within arm's reach. He burst into the room, crunching the door hinges and smacking the handle deep into the plaster, and nearly fell over trying to stop. For that split second, when it was just a blur, on my *life* I thought it would be Pete.

It wasn't Pete. He was huge. A big, broken, sad face. I didn't say anything, just stared. He must have been seven foot. He stared too, wild. We stared. He said two low, fragile words, "My son," then trailed off and just pointed it at me.

The words sounded dumb even as I spluttered them: "Please, I have a-"

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He dropped the gun, apparently surprised by what he'd done, through from my perspective it was hard to see how it might have been an accident. I couldn't see what was in his other hand, but I had a good guess. He presented it to me timidly, like a receipt for our transaction, and I could see then that this had not been his plan. He must have imagined shoving it in my face, or making me eat it as I died. The whole thing seemed to be surprising him a lot more than it was me - I always figured I had something like this coming.

I was paralysed, I could feel that immediately. My body felt like soft lead, heavy and heatless, as I lay slumped against the oak panelled wall, heart pounding, my head bent awkwardly down into my chest as the last twinges control and sensation faded from my clammy hands. I gurgled like a baby. Blood, I saw, sticky brilliant blood dribbling down my chin. Messy business.

I couldn't take the slip from his hand, but I could read it even through the rivers of sweat trickling into my eyes. And I could see his issue with me - with *us*, but Pete lucked out and died first. I could see how horrible the last three years must have been for this hulking man and his tiny kid, and how much worse that final moment must have been. POISON. One of the machine's bitterest pills. He probably thought it was the worst you could get. I knew better, but I wasn't in a position to argue.

Ah, who knew? Maybe it was. I tried to imagine watching Lisa suckle one of those cold rubber teets I filled Cath's role with, knowing that any given gulp might be infected with a fatal toxin. He must have known that checking his food beforehand wouldn't help, but I knew, now, having Lisa, that it wouldn't have stopped him. Nothing could have stopped him. He probably starved him for a while. Okay, big guy, maybe you're right. You've certainly got

me beat - all I had to endure was seven months knowing I'd kill the woman I loved. I got off easy. I *deserve* this.

It wasn't until after a few sizable seconds of self-pity that something I'd said over a year ago suddenly drifted through my head again. "*When something actually happens, you forget,*" or words to that effect. I almost laughed. Ha! I just remembered, *I don't die like this!* Screw you and your dead son, asshole! I'm going to get up now and kick your ass now, and after that I'm going to raise my goddamn daughter to lead a long happy life dying of Emphysema! If you'll just give me the use of my limbs for a moment.

I manage to cough a bubble of blood, close enough to stain him with a few flecks. Take *that!* My breath stank of, what, money? Dirty loose change, that acid stink. The only thing I could feel was the sweat trickling down my face, nothing below my neck - so much goddamn sweat. Who knew getting shot was such hard work? I was excited now, though, this was my thing. My heart raced. The impossible, you big-boned prick, is my goddamn speciality. You are so fucked. I was just about to stand up, I felt sure, when he slammed an enormous knee into my chest and kept it there, kneeling on me with what must have been all of his gigantic weight.

When I came to I saw, even as the pressure mounted, nothing on my chest. Both the man's knees were walking away from me to investigate a tiny cry from Lisa in the cot. I couldn't see his reaction, I couldn't get up, I couldn't get this invisible fucking thing off my chest, I couldn't *breathe*.

I had just enough time to think, "Oh whatever, this hardly counts," before I let out a sad little rasp and it all closed in.

Fuck.