

Momentum

A short story set a little in the future

“Borderline is a catchall.” A nurse had once told him. “It means they haven’t a clue what’s going on in your head.”

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Leo Babb woke and gave his usual slight groan, to greet the new day. The bedside clock said seven thirty, which was a little early, but he needed a full day to get everything ready. He reached over and cancelled the eight o’clock alarm and turned to look out of the gap in his bedroom curtains.

“Morning world.” He muttered.

Leo’s days were all based around routine and an important part of that was checking the weather. The chink of window showed him a glorious sunny August morning, in Sweet Springs West Virginia. Weather really mattered when you lived in a mobile home, or trailer as all his friends called it. Rain meant having to place the bowls and buckets under the worst of the leaks. Snow was the worst problem; it could crush the roof in, if you didn’t get up there with a blower. Leo knew a few people with snow blowers, though there were times when he’d managed to piss them all off. Then he had to hire a blower and that could be expensive.

“Come on.” He muttered to himself. “Get your ass out of bed.”

He swung his legs out of bed and sat there for a few seconds, shoving his feet into the flip flops that he used as slippers. Leo Babb wasn’t christened with that name and everything official, like his driver’s license and nearly maxed out MasterCard, had his name as Leonard Paul Babb. His best friend Jerry had started calling him Leo when they were both about five years old and it had stuck. Much like Leo had stuck in Sweet Springs, he’d never lived anywhere more than twenty miles away in his forty eight years of life. Leo had never owned a passport and had only once been on a plane. That experience had left him determined to only go to places that he could drive to.

“If I can’t turn onto route 311 and get there, I’m not going.” He’d once told Jerry.

Leo walked across his bedroom and down the short corridor to the kitchen area. He sat at the table and began his most important morning ritual, even more important than getting coffee. Leo reached for the cigarette rolling machine. Roll ups weren’t just cheaper; the morning routine settled his mind and relaxed him. He used to waste more tobacco than he smoked, before discovering the rolling machine. Pot heads used them, but they worked perfectly for ordinary smokes. Leo put in the papers and filled the machine, tamping down the loose tobacco. It was all so calming and helped him concentrate on the dreams he’d had. A few twists of the wheels on the machine, a bit more prodding and pushing and he had something that looked a mess, but it was smokable. Leo had tried adding a bit of cannabis once, but it just gave him a splitting headache for days and the munchies. He’d put on about twenty pounds and given himself migraine, so he went back to pure tobacco.

“Ohhh.”

That first puff was so good, even if the tobacco was a bit stale. Wednesday morning on a great August day and he’d be dead by Friday, or so the voices in the dream had told him. The grey men he’d called them, after looking up alien dreams on Google. He had no idea what they looked like, but he had to call them something, so he thought of them as the grey men.

Next on the routine was coffee, which would splutter and brew, while he decided on what meds he’d take that morning. He bashed out yesterday’s dregs from the filter of the coffee machine and put in a good heap of ground coffee from a packet. Filled it with water and pressed the on switch.

“Hurry up.” He told the machine, another routine.

While it worked, Leo went into the bathroom and opened the cabinet. There were about a dozen different bottles of pills and he tended to mix and match depending on what he had planned for the day. Leo had drunk quite a bit the previous night, he usually did. After a lasagne out of the microwave, or a pizza, it had been cannelloni last night. He’d get his favourite pint glass and fill it about a third full of rum. Then he’d fill the rest with ice cold diet coke, before slowly drinking it until bedtime. It was too much, he knew that, but it was far less than he’d drunk when he was younger. Leo looked at the line of bottles and chose the six which would quieten the noises in his head, without making him too drowsy. The grey men never talked to him during the day, they only ever spoke to him in dreams and those dreams were clearer than real life.

“Serotonin reuptake inhibitors are your friend.” He muttered.

He took the first of the pills and quickly the other five. Leo Babb was borderline, which was why he was on so many meds. Borderline depressive, borderline schizophrenic, borderline personality disorder.

“Borderline fucking human.” His ex-wife often called him.

That was before she’d taken their son and run off to somewhere or other. Her note hadn’t said where they were going and her mother refused to tell, even called the cops when he refused to leave her house.

“You’ll just go crazy and try to find me.” It said in the note.

She was right, he had more than borderline obsessive compulsive disorder, he had it bad. For over a year, he pestered and threatened her friends and relatives. That wasn’t the first time he’d been in trouble with the cops, but it was the first time he’d been hospitalised. The food hadn’t been bad and the nurses had been quite kind. It was just looking out of the window and knowing he couldn’t go out there when he wanted to. Like a caged beast, he kept quiet and bided his time, only to start threatening her relatives again. The second time in hospital was far less pleasant and he was determined to never go back. He was there for a few months, until a duly authorised psychiatrist was willing to tell the State of Western Virginia, that Leonard Babb was no longer a threat to himself or others. He found that bit ironic, considering what he was planning to do.

“Borderline is a catchall.” A nurse had once told him. “It means they haven’t a clue what’s going on in your head.”

The reason he believed the grey men were real, was mainly because they’d encouraged him to keep taking his meds. When he’d been young, the voices had always tried to get him to stop taking his pills, often succeeding. Leo had become pretty well known by the cops in those days and infamous in Sweet Springs. Keep stealing people’s cars and breaking their windows and people get pissed off. By the time he was about fifteen, Leo had pissed off most of the town. Despite it all, Leo still believed that deep down he was a good person, that his soul was decent. He supposed that most people felt like that. Probably Saddam Hussein had gone to bed at night, thinking the ends justified the means and he was really an ok kind of guy. Such thoughts still troubled Leo, he’d almost told the grey men to go to hell. Now he was planning to kill quite a few people on Friday and justifying it as the means justifying the end.

“Booyah !” He shouted as he washed the pills down with coffee.

Leo had heard the expression used on *Breaking Bad* and he’d been using it a lot since. He was still wearing just his boxer shorts and the next part of his routine was a shower, but he noticed an email from Jerry, about a date for the band. His computer was old, before dual core and still running Windows XP. It did all that Leo wanted though, he could use it to get his emails and look up stuff on

the net. His broadband was slow, mainly due to the long length of copper wire between him and the main highway. Plus he could see the cable swaying about on windy nights. Still, on most days he could get a fast enough connection to do what he needed to do.

'I got us a booking for Friday week.' Said the email. 'McGill's Care Home. They want us to do a social evening. Lots of easy listening stuff. – Jerry.'

Crap, now he had to ignore Jerry or lie to him. Leo was the keyboard player for Knuckle Cracker, the band he'd formed with Jerry, when they were both crazy eighteen year olds. They'd started off doing heavy rock, but they were terrible at it. They'd been a four piece band then, but one guy had either died, or gone to live it Portland. Leo was drinking heavily then and his memory of the time was poor. Instead of a drummer, Leo set up a backing track on his synthesiser and they still sucked.

Leo had no real memory of them shifting from rock to easy listening, but it had given them some financial success. Now he went out to gigs dressed in chinos and Hawaiian shirts, but they had a lot of repeat business. Leo had a bit of money from various welfare benefits, but it was Knuckle Cracker that earned him the few thousand dollars a year, that meant living rather than barely surviving. As well as the keyboards, Leo had a small van and drove them to gigs. It made him essential and probably explained why they'd put up with him for so many years.

"Shit." He muttered at the email.

He couldn't tell Jerry that he'd be dead by then and he'd never believe that he had a date. Jerry was just about the only real friend he had and knew that Leo hadn't had any real action in years. About three times a year, he had a desperation fuck with Lola, the divorcee with three kids, who lived in the trailer next to his. Leo was mentally incapable of just ignoring the email; he had to think of something. He decided to lie.

'Hi Jerry. Yeah, great. I'll dig out the Billy Joel stuff and put it in my diary.'

Billy Joel was one of their jokes about easy listening music; they considered his stuff to be the blandest sound on the planet. Jerry's reply arrived quickly; he was obviously having a quiet morning. Jerry was a large animal veterinarian and usually had his arm up a cow's backside by this time of the day.

'Wear your brightest Hawaiian shirt – J.'

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Leo had taken his time over showering and dressing. He considered that kind of personal self-indulgence, made up for some of the crap life had thrown at him. Did his mental health issues make him more attuned to the grey men? They'd never given him a straight answer on that, but they did hint that he was fairly unique and was their 1st, 2nd and probably 3rd choice as the killer of Peter Walters.

Breakfast had consisted of about three spoonfuls of baked beans, out a tin the refrigerator. Leo liked to think of himself as muscular and wiry, though others called him skinny.

"I've seen more meat on a chicken's foot." Lola had once told him.

Washed dressed and with breakfast out of the way, Leo felt in the drawer next to the sink and brought out the writing pad, that he'd been writing down his dreams in. Only the grey men dreams, his other dreams were the usual mixed up shit, which everyone dreamt. The grey men had encouraged him to write it all down, it was important that he explained it all to Peter Walters. The book would go with him and be destroyed in the explosion, not that anyone would believe any of it anyway. He picked a biro out of the bunch in an old pickle jar, but went to page one and read the first few lines he'd written, nearly a year before.

'I thought Peter Walters must be a professor at MIT, but it appears that the inventor of the device is just an advanced student in the high energy lab.'

A bit further down the page.

'I've been selected to make sure he never perfects his invention. They've shown me destroyed galaxies, billions of dead beings. I must murder Peter Walters.'

Leo had doubted his own sanity in the first few months after the dreams started. When they'd first told him the extent of the destruction they wanted him to cause, he'd told the grey men that he needed proof and time to decide. The proof had been long tortuous formulas and recordings of the fate of other worlds, where such a device had been perfected. He wrote it all down in his book and it all seemed so convincing in the dreams, but so crazy once he woke up. Crazy !! To Him !! Jeez, he was only person he knew, who'd been rejected by the army for being too unstable.

"Why can't you show me yourselves, your world ?" He'd asked.

"We're nothing like Earth's organic beings." They'd told him. "We lack even enough common vocabulary, to start to describe us and our world."

It wasn't just Earth, it was other worlds at risk from Peter and his invention. World's unaware that the little blue planet, circling an ordinary sun, even held life. They could be instantly wiped out of existence. Yet still he hesitated, they wanted him to kill so many people. After six months they decided he was being too hesitant and said they'd need to move onto another person. He was ideal, but they could sympathise with his view and would try someone else. They gave him two dream free nights and returned on the third night for a decision. Leo said yes !

His whole life he'd been a fuckup and he had a chance to do something good. There were going to be a lot of deaths, but billions would live and Earth would be given a future. Deep down, Leo knew he wanted to feel important, for once in his life. No fame, he'd just be the bum in the trailer, who'd driven off in his van on Thursday and vanished. Most would assume he'd pissed someone off enough for them to kill him and dump him down a well. He'd know though..... in the few seconds before the explosion, he'd know he'd saved the planet.

Leo had sixty hand written pages in the book, so he'd been working on a summary to tell Peter Walters. He had to know, the grey men said that was important. They'd confirmed the times with him last night and he only had two more nights to dream. Peter and his whole group were meeting for a celebration on Friday night and they were all going to die. They had to die !

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It was late afternoon and Leo was clearing the crap out of his van. The Grumman LLV had cost him very little at an auction and he loved it the way most women love their first born. He nearly hadn't bought the LLV, but Jerry had been with him.

"If the US Postal Service owned it for five years and couldn't destroy it, it's perfect for you." Jerry had said.

Jerry had been right, the slightly battered 2.5 Litre LLV, was perfect for carrying the band's amps, musical equipment and the general crap that most bands needed. He'd even slept in it a few times, to save the cost of a motel room. It seemed to thrive on neglect and had never let them down, always starting on the first try. Snow was a problem, especially as West Virginia seemed to be full of the stuff for two months of the year.

"Handles like a damn wet banana !" Jerry had once said.

Apart from snow, the LLV clung to the road well and after a year, he'd had it resprayed a nice boring shade of beige. It had been blown over in white, but the old Postal Service logos could still be seen. After its beige makeover, the Grumman looked like any one of a million other delivery vans. It was

beige, it was nondescript and it was boring and the cops left him alone. Twice he'd been pulled up and only once had he been asked to open the back.

"Hey." The cop had said. "Are you a roadie?"

"No, I'm the keyboard player with Knuckle Cracker."

"No Kidding !! My mom loves you guys."

There followed a two hour conversation about the quality of Yamaha and were they now better than Roland and if any drum kit was worth the price. He'd been late getting to the post office and had to make another trip the following day.

Leo looked at the van and it would do for one night. Their kit came in the usual boxes, that seemed designed to withstand a nuclear exchange, but he still used extra foam rubber to keep it all in place. He'd made a comfortable bed out of the foam rubber and placed a sleeping bag on top. He'd need something to pee in, his bladder wasn't that good these days. Come to think of it, most of him had seen better days. Leo found he was almost in tears at the loss of his van. It comforted him slightly, to think that they'd both be destroyed at exactly the same moment.

The grey men had given him a time and place, one opportunity to kill Peter Walters and all his team. A gift of an opportunity to make sure that everyone associated with his device, died with him. Peter didn't realise that his creation worked, it was just a good idea.... Until he had an energy source large enough to power it. The high energy lab had just received funding to create just such an energy source and they were all going out on Friday night. A meal and a few drinks to celebrate. It would take a few years to complete the prototype energy source, but then Peter would use it to power his device. Planet earth would be destroyed within a year, maybe less.

"I'll drive up on the Thursday, it's only seven hundred miles to Cambridge MA." He told the grey men. "Sleep in the van overnight and then drive to the bar on Friday night."

They liked the plan. Sweet Springs to MIT was about a twelve hour drive in the LLV, but going the day before, gave him extra time.

"Good ! If the van breaks down, you have time to steal another vehicle." They said.

Stealing vehicles was familiar ground to Leo, there was little he couldn't have open and started within a minute. He loved his old LLV though and was sure it wouldn't let him down.

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He was about to lock the LLV up, when he saw the familiar outline of Lola's old Honda, driving in from the site entrance. He had an odd relationship with Lola, but it mattered to him, in an odd kind of way. She worked at the bottling plant, the famous Sweet Springs water. There had been a husband and just one kid when she moved into the trailer next door. Another baby had arrived quite quickly and then another about eighteen months after that. The husband appeared to never have a proper job and there seemed to always be someone banging on their door for money. Add three young kids into the mix and Leo wasn't surprised when her husband had left her and moved to Florida. It shocked Lola though, she seemed in a terrible state for months. One night, he'd gone over to moan about her eldest, fiddling with his beloved LLV. She'd screamed back and they'd soon ended up in her bed, fucking like bunnies.

"Lola ! Really ?!" Jerry had said. "Talk about sloppy seconds."

He hadn't told anyone else and Lola didn't seem to have mentioned it to anyone either. They both seemed to be each other's guilty secret, a shared desperation fuck. Every three or four months, they'd watch about ten minutes of a DVD and then spend two or three hours in bed. It wasn't great, but it was better than nothing. Lola was often rude and insulting, but she was always there, in the

trailer next door. That mattered, when so much in his life seemed so fleeting. Lola got out of her car and placed her hands on her hips, scowling at him.

“Well, if it isn’t Mick Jagger.” She said. “Are you going out this week ? You didn’t seem to even go out for beer last week.”

“I go out Lola, when you’re busy putting caps on bottles of fizzy water.”

Why did it always go like this ? He tried, but they always ended up screeching insults and threats at each other. He’d broken a window on her trailer once, something he still felt ashamed of.

“Creep ! About time you got a proper job yourself.”

“I wasn’t lucky enough to lie on my back and get three kids.”

He’d crossed the line, he knew it. Lola could take a lot of crap, she almost seemed to thrive on it. You just didn’t insult her kids, in any way, at all. Her brother was a decent guy, who owned a high powered hunting rifle. If you lived in a home made of plywood and aluminium, it didn’t pay to upset people who owned high powered rifles.

“Bastard !” She screeched. “I’m going to call the cops and tell them you’ve been going all loony tunes on me. They’ll have you back in the crazy house by nightfall.”

There was a stone right next to his foot, it would have been so easy to pick it up and smash in one of her windows. He turned around and continued to lock up the LLV.

“Whatever.” He said.

He heard her door slam as she went into her trailer. Why oh why ? He liked her, you couldn’t have sex four times a year, for years and not bond. It was natural, it was how nature intended it to be. Especially now, when he’d be dead on Friday night. He approached her door and gave it one hard thump. Lola opened it very quickly and he could see she was crying.

“Sorry.” He said.

She glared at him for a while, before he saw her eyes soften.

“I wouldn’t.” She said. “Call the cops.”

“I know.”

“It’s just that my jerk of an ex-husband is two months behind on money for the kids and the bottling plant are talking about going onto short time working.”

“Are the kids ok ?” He asked.

“Fine, they’re not old enough to understand.” She said. “My mom has them straight after school, I need to collect them.”

“Ok. Are we alright Lola.”

“Yeah, I need to let off steam sometimes.”

He turned to leave, but heard her voice again.

“I have a few DVDs you haven’t seen. If you fancy coming over ?” She asked.

“That’ll be great, I’ll bring some drinks.”

“About ten, after the kids are asleep.”

“Fine, see you at ten.”

Leo went to his trailer, wondering why he hadn’t tried harder before. Lola was on her own, he was on his own, all it needed was a bit of thought. That was his problem though, borderline fucking stupid !

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Leo wondered what the noise was for a few seconds, before realising it was his bedside radio alarm, trying to play the radio and make annoying alarm sounds at the same time. It wasn’t a sound he wasn’t used to hearing. He reached over and hit the button to turn it off.

“Crap, seven am.” He muttered.

He wanted to be on the road by nine and he still had a lot of things to do. Actually he didn’t and knew it, he just needed to go through his usual morning routine and even hurried, it would take an hour and a half. He wandered over to the kitchen table and began making his morning roll up cigarette. He’d buy some readymade cigarettes for the journey at the service station and some of those caffeine drinks to keep him awake.

“Damn, forgot the weather.”

He pulled the curtains aside and saw it was another fine August morning, Thursday the twentieth of August, the day before he was to die. Leo also saw Lola getting into her elderly Toyota, the kids crammed into the back. He waved and she noticed him and waved back.

“I’ll miss you Lola. I hope you’ll miss me.” He mumbled to himself.

They’d only watched about twenty minutes of Silent Hill on DVD, before undressing and enjoying sex on her sofa. He felt like a teenager again and it had been good, really good. She sent him home at about one in the morning and he hadn’t even bothered to dress. He picked up all his clothes and ran across the twenty feet or so of pebbles and grass, to his own trailer. It was great, even the mud on his bed sheets, from his dirty feet. It was like dating Lucy Forbes again, being seventeen again, having to grab his clothes and run away from her father again.

“Coffee.” He muttered.

It was no good thinking of what might have been. Last night had been good, because he knew it was the last time he’d be with a woman. He’d been caring and unselfish, things he wasn’t usually good at. If they’d started a relationship, he’d have been the same asshole he’d been to his ex-wife. The world was full of might have beens.

“Forget it old buddy.” He muttered.

Showered, shaved and dressed by eight thirty, a record. Leo had a bag with two changes of clothing, a disposable razor and other essentials. He’d been planning it for weeks and his OCD actually helped him to plan well for such things. Such things indeed ! A shopping trip to New York could be called such things, not a trip to wipe out most of Cambridge MA. He had maps, even a street map that he’d bought online. At first he’d kept his Google searches to a minimum, but then he’d realised thousands of college kids would be looking up MIT. Leo used Google earth to walk right round the campus and find the bar they’d be using on Friday.

His hand was actually shaking, as he looked at his trailer and locked the door for the last time. The three bags he’d put essentials in, were surprisingly heavy, as he put them in the back of the LLV. Leo ran through his mental list again and decided he had everything. Of course he had to go through the list three more times and give himself a headache.

“Meds, fuck. My meds !”

He’d taken that morning’s seven pills, but had forgotten to put the bottles in his bag. Unlocking the trailer meant another check around and it was nine fifteen, before he drove out of the Sweet Springs Mobile Home Park and headed east. Stress left him, as he drove along route 311 and checked the map on the passenger seat. He didn’t need to, he had the route memorised and checked on Google, down to the last service station and turn off for Cambridge. He needed fuel and a few sweets for the journey, it was all planned, he’d use the service station, about five miles along 311.

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The Grumman LLV didn’t let him down, he never thought it would. Leo Babb arrived in Cambridge at about eight forty five. Actually there was no about, about it, he’d bought a new watch that told him

it was exactly 20:45 and 17 seconds. The grey men had made him rehearse what he had to say to Peter Walters and said how important timing was.

“Too soon and he might run, too late and you’ll be talking as it happens.” They’d said.

He had to finish talking to Peter, at a few seconds before eleven pm. Leo had bought a watch that updated itself via radio, just to make sure he knew the exact time. He already had two accurate quartz watches, but he’d spent some of his precious cash on the new radio controlled super watch. It wasn’t that expensive, but it had cost him the money he’d earned from a particularly annoying gig at the local high school. A Sadie Hawkins dance and someone had actually tipped water over his head.

“Food and then bed.” He muttered.

Leo felt the need for human contact after the long drive and his LLV needed fuel. He found a service station and filled the van.

“Does she still run ok?”

“Sorry?”

“The LLV? I had one years ago, brings back some good memories.”

The man talking to him looked past fifty and he was filling up an expensive looking BMW. A woman of about the same age, was grinning at him from the passenger seat.

“Yeah, had her years. Thrives on neglect and always and I mean always, starts at the first try.”

Answered Leo.

The woman got out of the BMW and walked over.

“Oh Walt, it reminds me of our courting days.”

Walt leant into Leo and gave a stage whisper.

“There weren’t so many motels in those days.”

“Walt you rogue.” Said the woman.

“Are you visiting folk in Cambridge?” Asked Walt.

Leo had no idea why he suddenly became so honest. He liked them and they’d once owned and obviously loved an LLV. He was seven hundred miles from home, which was like visiting the moon for him and he’d found friendly moon folk.

“No.” He said. “I have a delivery tomorrow at MIT. I drove up today, hoping to find somewhere to park and sleep in the van. You know? Save on the expenses.”

They didn’t look at him as though he was crazy, the woman came closer.

“There’s the road near us Walt, that would be perfect.”

“Yeah, the lane, of course.” Said Walt. “Got a map?”

Leo grabbed the map off his passenger seat and Walt spread it over the bonnet of the BMW. It was the map with the route from Sweet Springs marked out and a red ring around the bar. At that moment, Leo realised that perhaps, he wasn’t as cut out for espionage work as he might have thought. Luckily it soon wouldn’t matter what anyone might guess.

“Here.” Said Walt. “I’ll mark it for you. Light enough to put off the thieves, but not so residential that someone will call the police.”

“If they see a strange van parked up.” Added the woman.

“Thank you, I’ll get something to eat and park there.” Said Leo.

He folded up the map and started to walk towards the service station office, or rather the slot in the window, where you paid after dark.

“Here.” Said Walt. “I’m Walt and my wife is Jean. If you get any problems, give us a call.”

He was handing him half a McDonald's fry's carton, with a telephone number and address written on the back. Leo folded it and scrunched it into his pocket.

"Thank you, I'm Leo."

"I hope you have a good time in Cambridge." Said Walt.

"Thank you."

They shook hands, it seemed quaint, like Walt calling the cops the police. Leo watched their BMW drive away, as he paid for his fuel.

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He wanted a proper place to sit and eat. Not a drive thru, or one of the places, where gangs of kids huddle outside, munching over cooked chicken nuggets. He had a bit of credit left on his MasterCard and he now knew it wouldn't be needed for a motel room. He wanted clean, he wanted decent food, he wanted a decent bathroom, so he could have a quick wash before bedtime.

Leo looked at the Pizza place for a while before parking up and going inside. The windows glinted in the street light and he liked the green and orange colour scheme. There were a few people inside and everything looked spotless. It meant nothing of course, the kitchen might have been knee deep in roaches. He opened the door, to be greeted by the addictive smell of freshly backed dough.

'Please seat yourself.' Said the sign.

There was a litter bin inside the door. Leo took the cardboard fry's packet from his pocket, the one with Walt and Jean's address on. He didn't unfold it, he ripped it in two and then in two again. When he couldn't rip it any further, he ripped the individual pieces, finally dropping the handful of confetti into the bin. Then he found a table by the window.

Walt and his wife were nice, too nice, they'd even owned an LLV. They were the sort of people to be home at eleven on a Friday night, perhaps even be in bed. They were what he and Lucy could have been, if he hadn't been so borderline in so many things. He'd have phoned them and popped round, just for coffee of course. By the time he left, he'd have told them all about the grey men and be hysterically begging them to leave town for few days.

"Are you ready to order?" Asked the pretty brunette.

"You really make zabaglione, fresh on the premises?" He asked.

"Yes we do."

He ordered a calzone with a green salad and about half a dozen side dishes. Plus of course zabaglione for desert. It was likely to be his last blow out meal, so he wanted to make the most of the opportunity. No wine, he'd realised drinking and driving was a bad idea, after the third driving ban and huge fine.

"Thank you." Said the waitress.

She had a nice walk that showed off her legs as she walked away. The zabaglione would be a disappointment though, he knew it. Leo had acquired a bit of a thing for the Italian desert, when he dated his ex-wife. Now though, he was always disappointed with what most places dished up when he asked for one.

The food arrived fairly slowly, but mainly because it was all freshly cooked and delicious. Even the zabaglione was perfect.

"The condemned man ate a hearty dinner." He mumbled.

He ordered coffee and had a quick wash in the bathroom before it arrived. The bathroom was clean and he felt like a new man, as he sipped his coffee and watched the good people of Cambridge walk past the window. It was late by the time he paid the bill and left a decent tip for the waitress. He felt different now. He'd felt awkward in Cambridge, like a fish out of water. Now, after a couple of hours

watching from the Pizzeria window he felt like a native of the town. He strode to the LLV, starting her up and driving towards the lane, where Walt had told him it was safe to spend the night.

The night had gone smoothly, apart from the minor panic at around four am. Finding the Maglite flashlight had been hard in the dark, as had been finding the large empty pickle jar. Eventually he'd managed to get the light where he needed it to be and successfully relieved his bladder. Leo slept again, until he found himself looking at his new watch, which said nine am, in the light from the LED Maglite.

"Damn !"

He bashed his head on the side of the van, everything was awkward without proper light. Leo went through a cut down version of his morning routine. Shop bought cigarettes instead of roll ups, a tin of high caffeine wake up drink instead of coffee. Hand gel went everywhere, under his arms, all over his soft bits, he used it in truly inventive ways. As the caffeine kicked in, Leo became more confident and shaved himself with a disposable razor. No mirror of course.

"Shaving mirrors are for wimps !" Was a favourite expression of his ex-wife.

By the time he'd dressed in fresh clothes, he felt good. He got out of the van and blinked in the sunlight. It was another glorious, sunny day. Leo crouched and looked in the van's wing mirror. He looked ok too, better than he did most mornings.

"Morning."

He looked round, to find an old guy walking a tiny dog on a lead.

"Morning." He replied.

So normal, everything was so normal. The van started first time, but chugged a bit. Like him, it was getting on a bit and nothing worked quite as well as it once had. Leo drove, hardly needing the map to find the North End Bar and Grill.

It was a sports bar on a corner, a circular building that looked like somewhere that had been popular a few decades before. A big carpark that went two thirds of the way round the building and flowed seamlessly into parking for a small row of shops. Perfect, there'd be no trouble parking when he came back that night. Less than twelve hours, his new super watch told him it was 11:24 and 8 seconds.

There were a few cars in the car park and at least four trucks. Leo slowly drove his LLV into the car park and pulled up in a nice wide bay. He wasn't worried about CCTV or nosey passers-by. No one was going to look at CCTV footage and talk to the cops.

"That's him officer ! I knew he was acting a bit strange."

No, there'd be no CCTV or the recorders and various servers they linked to. He walked round to the front of the North End, as the locals called it and looked inside. Plenty of space, the few morning drinkers and burger eaters, seemed lost at one end. It was a barn of a place, out in a dead end of town and would probably be closed down in a few years. Even the menu couldn't make its mind up. Burgers, steaks and a strange list of Mexican food.

'Thursday night is ladies night.' It said on the door. 'First drink is free !'

Things were bad, even the sign was yellowing at the edges. It was exactly the kind of place, where Peter Walters would bring his team from the high energy lab. Cheap booze, crap food, it was the sort of place that college students had wet dreams about. Leo was tempted to go in, he was hungry again, even after his meal of epic proportions the previous night.

"Not a good idea buddy." He mumbled.

She'd be in there. The really cute barmaid who'd given up a promising medical career, to nurse a blind and incontinent grandmother. He'd be crying and talking about grey men and leaving town and it would all be..... just plain crazy. He didn't want to know the staff of the North End, or any of their regular customers. Leo started the LLV, pleased that it no longer chugged at him. He'd find a Mall, there were several on his map. He'd get a McDonald's happy meal and do some silly shopping. He had a few hundred dollars on him and less than ten hours to spend it.

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The LLV began to chug again as he drove back to the North End Bar and Grill. Nothing serious, a small tune up job probably. He'd spent most of his money on a black silk shirt. Go out in fucking style ! It was nine thirty pm as he looked across the street and waited for the lights to change. Just enough time to find Peter Walters, give him the story and make sure the human race survived.

"No pressure old buddy."

He laughed at his own joke and ignored the chugging of the LLV. She'd get him there, it was only a few yards now. The carpark was half empty, the North End obviously wasn't the coolest and most popular joint in town. His much loved Grumman, limped into a space and almost seemed to give a sigh of relieve, as he turned her off.

"Need a hand ?"

"He's a really good mechanic."

A guy in his Friday best and his girl, giving him a bit of an ego boost.

"No, if she won't start, she can stay here for the night." Replied Leo.

"Ok, fine. We'll be inside if you change your mind."

Nice, so damn nice ! He'd kept meeting nice people in the Mall, some with kids. It was a shitting fucking world, but sometimes the only choices you're left with.... are bad ones ! Millions would live, no billions they'd told him.

Leo walked into the bar and had no trouble finding the gang from the high energy lab. The place had at least a hundred customers, but still looked half empty. It wasn't the place to come for a quiet intimate evening. Peter Walters didn't want quiet or intimate, he was on the slammers and screeching like a banshee. He had a lot to celebrate, funding for speculative energy projects was the in thing and he'd caught the top of the wave.

"More Jeanie. More, lots more !" He was shouting to a waitress.

The waitress had obviously become part of the celebration and was busily filling glasses from a huge bottle of tequila. The grey men wanted Peter Walters to hear why he had to die, but did he have to be sober enough to understand ? Too soon to move to their table, Leo went to the bar and bought an unidentified glass of cola, with plenty of ice. Tempting to have a drink, but then he might garble the message, or forget it altogether.

"Haven't seen you in here before."

A really cute waitress, he could almost see the pictures of her crippled grandmother coming out of her purse.

"Just delivered a few things to MIT. They seem to be having quite a night."

He nodded towards the high energy team, who seemed to have adopted Jeanie the waitress.

"Oh them, they just got a stack of money from the government. Makes you wonder who gets our taxes huh ?"

"Too true." He replied.

Leo wasn't used to people being nice to him. He was known to everyone in Sweet Springs, they crossed the road to avoid him. Nice was odd and difficult to handle. Luckily the waitress had other thirsty customers to look after.

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"Here we go Leo. Don't fuck it up." He mumbled.

He'd had two large cokes and a trip to the bathroom. His new black silk shirt made him feel confident and he just had to deliver the message to Peter Walters. Luckily the grey men had provided him with enough information to make sure Peter took him seriously. He ignored Jeanie and her bottle of tequila and squeezed himself onto the seating opposite Peter Walters. The students already in the seats looked a bit put out, but that hardly mattered. He certainly had everyone's attention.

"Peter, it's important that you listen to me." He said.

He looked at his radio controlled watch, 10:32 and 7 seconds, almost perfect.

"Hey, who is this guy?" Someone shouted.

"Get him out of here."

Leo persisted.

"Your device worked Peter, you just didn't know it. Not enough energy, but your new invention will cure that."

Strong hands were gripping him, trying to lift him up and out of the seat.

"Leave him." Said Peter. "Hey, I said leave him alone."

"Thank you."

"I'll give you a minute." Said Peter Walters.

"Oh we'll need longer than that. You think of your device as a temporal lock. Something to create a stasis field, to keep the terminally ill in suspended animation for as long as it takes to find a cure. Or used to send whole star ships full of humans to the planets, to colonise mars and beyond."

He had Peter's attention and his whole team were quiet. Strangely sobered up by what they were hearing.

"Did you really do that?" Asked Jeanie.

"Shut up, let him talk."

"You didn't invent a temporal lock, you invented the opposite." Said Leo. "You invented a device that unlocks the time stream and lets you enter it, anywhere and at any time."

Leo picked up a half full shot glass and drank the tequila, he needed it.

"It needs a lot of energy and a stabiliser, but you'd crack that in two or three years." He continued.

"Then you'd have a fully working time machine."

They laughed, Jeanie actually filled the glass in front of him, but Peter wasn't laughing.

"Shut up, let him talk!"

Peter was smiling at him now. He was convinced that Leo wasn't just a nutter with a need to rant at scientists and that would help with the rest of the message. Leo's watch was telling him it was 10:47 and 21 seconds.

"Who told you all this? Asked Peter.

They'd mentioned this question to him and he'd agreed that saying 'the grey men,' might be seen as crazy or at best, flippant.

"You're not stupid Peter, you can probably guess that they weren't born on planet Earth."

He'd expected more derisive laughter, but most of the bar were clustered around Peter Walters and his expression defied anyone to laugh.

"I'm here to tell you why you aren't being allowed to perfect the device." Said Leo.

Quiet now, or as quiet as any bar on a busy corner ever gets.

"Look..... what's your name?"

"My name is Leo Babb."

"Look Leo, I'm a high energy physics researcher. I know all about paradoxes and going back in time and shooting my grandfather. Do you really think I'd be stupid enough to do it?"

Leo just shook his head, the grey men had taken him through all this.

"No, peter, no. The universe doesn't work like that. You exist on the time stream, you affected a lot of people. Shoot your grandfather and you'd still exist. I don't understand the tech, but it appears that the universe is pretty good at duct taping over the small cracks, the occasional paradox."

He sat back and drank another shot glass of tequila and Jeanie filled it again. To hell with it, he'd go out half drunk, maybe full drunk. Not long now and the fat lady was already getting ready to sing.

"You squash a bug that was supposed to infect a dictator with a deadly disease." He continued. "You cross the road and cause a car to slow down..... harmless, fucking harmless. But the car arrives in the next street a bit later than it should and runs down a kid. That kid was supposed to find a cure to the next great plague. More duct tape over the cracks Peter."

He looked straight at Peter.

"Have you ever repaired a leaking pipe with duct tape?" Leo asked.

"Yeah, makes it worse in the end." Said Jeanie.

Peter just stared at him.

"You put some duct tape over the wet rust and the leak stops." Said Leo. "Just for a while though and then you get the rust coloured wet spots on the floor. You stick on more tape, but two weeks later you notice a musty smell and the floor is wet. You just use more duct tape, really wrapping it round, yards of it. Eventually the whole lot bursts and your kitchen is flooded with stinking water."

He drank the tequila and Jeanie put her hand on his shoulder as she filled it. Nice people, why the hell did they all have to be so nice. He hadn't looked at his watch in a while, but to hell with it, Peter had the gist of it.

"I've seen it." Said Leo. "What happens when the duct tape bursts in the universe. They showed me. Whole galaxies gone, wiped out as if they'd never been. Billions upon billions of dead..... it can't be allowed to happen to the Earth."

Another shot of tequila and Leo knew he was drifting well off the agreed script, but Peter seemed to know what he needed to know.

"Momentum Peter, that's what will stop you. Kinetic energy and it's too late to escape it. If you had a helicopter outside, you'd never reach safe distance and I'm guessing you don't have a helicopter."

No response, Peter looked like a guy who'd won the lottery, only to be told he had terminal cancer.

"The earth spins at twenty four thousand miles an hour. The earth goes round the sun, the sun goes round the galaxy and best of all..... The galaxy is hurtling away from all the other galaxies. Yes Peter, the great expansion of the universe does count as velocity. About two thirds of the speed of light our galaxy is moving at and kinetic energy works on velocity squared. Fucking big number Peter, they showed it to me."

He lifted the shot glass and then put it down again. He wasn't really religious, but if he was about to meet his maker. He didn't want to be completely drunk for the meeting.

"I'm going to stop at eleven Peter, completely stop. Everything within a twenty five foot diameter of me will stop too." He said. "No idea how they'll do it, but me, you, all your team will come to a

complete stop. The chairs too, the foundations below my feet, even the air around us. Stopped, still, stationary to the rest of the universe.”

He gave that a second to sink in, knowing Peter’s whole team would understand.

“The rest of the universe will keep moving Peter, including planet Earth.” Said Leo. “Imagine the bang as it runs into us. Every molecule of our bodies, smashing into the planet like bullets. Even the air around us, every atom, destroying everything, heating the surrounding area to vast temperatures.”

Leo drank from the shot glass, God would have to judge him drunk.

“They told me the energy released will cause other reactions. It will be quite a bang Peter.”

They were all quiet, totally convinced.

“When does this happen ?” Asked Peter.

Leo had to put his watch up to eyes to read it, he was now fairly drunk.

“Oh crap, twelve seconds from now.”

No time to put things right or get therapy for his various borderlines. Not that any therapy existed. He watched the super watch indicate it was eleven pm, he’d even set it to peep an alarm. As the time came and went, he could see Peter laughing.

“You had me going there buddy, good one. Who put you up to this ?”

They were all looking relieved, it was now two minutes past eleven and no one had died. Leo knew the grey men had told him the truth, it was more than just faith, it was a year of detailed dreams.

“Was it Peg Leg Davison from Astro Physics ?” Asked Peter. “He’s always playing tricks like this. Hey Jeanie, a bottle of champagne, we’re all going to live after all.”

Jeanie never had time to get the champagne, the noise began at 11:04 and 5 seconds. Leo had no idea how the grey men tech worked, maybe it needed to warm up, or perhaps it was started off somewhere a long way off. It was the sound you get from rubbing a wet finger around a wine glass, but louder and far more intense. Peter was looking towards the bar door.

“No use.” Said Leo. “There’s nowhere safe out there.”

Jeanie was gone, but she’d left the tequila, so Leo filled both their glasses.

“I don’t think I want to meet God sober after all.” He said

Peter was grabbing his arm, as the ceiling tiles began to fall and the lights flickered.

“I did it though, didn’t I ?” He asked. “Created a time machine.”

The lights went out and someone was screaming. Peter used his cell phone as a flashlight, staring at Leo.

“Yes you did Peter. You succeeded.”

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Forty square miles was left devastated, a huge bite out of the east coast of America. They closed the ports and no airliners were allowed to land on US soil for three weeks. It was pointless, the politicians knew that, but the people expected some kind of immediate action. It had to be an attack with some kind of bomb, but the type of weapon was a mystery. There was radiation, but not enough for a tactical nuke. There were strange isotopes created, but not the usual ones left behind after any type of known bomb.

“It’s like something collided with the earth at almost unbelievable velocity.”

Said one eminent professor. Not from MIT of course, that particular place of learning was now a scorched cinder at the bottom of a mile deep crater. No one took the professor seriously of course, which was a pity, as he was almost right. First no one claimed responsibility and the media were making nasty insinuations about China and then North Korea. Then everyone claimed responsibility

and it became a circus. Rogue Palestinian groups to a small group of pacific islanders, wanting independence from someone or other. They all claimed to have dropped or planted some kind of mother of all bombs. The MOB device, the media called it for the year or so it took the hysteria to die down.

Peter, it turned out, had been a little paranoid about his research. He hadn't trusted it to the MIT servers, so it had never been backed up, or sent to any of the mirror sites. His own personal desk computer was vaporised with the rest of MIT, as was his laptop. There were no records and the entire team were dead. The funding was withdrawn and Peter's projects abandoned.

"The next Stephen Hawking, tragically killed." The media reported.

Peter had actually copied everything to a sixteen gig USB memory stick, in the shape of Darth Vader. The stick was pushed into the bottom of his sock drawer, at his parent's house in New Hampshire, well away from all the unpleasantness in Cambridge. His mother might have found it, if she hadn't decided his room was a shrine and no one was allowed to even dust, much less go through his things. Five years after Peter's death, she finally left the house with her husband, to visit relatives in Canada. Sadly the house was destroyed by fire, while they were away.

It appeared that a poor disturbed girl had broken in and inadvertently started a fire in the kitchen. She herself had died in the ensuing blaze. Her parents were upset and told the media that their daughter was a good person and refused to believe that her borderline personality disorder had anything to do with her committing the crime.

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~The End~

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