

1301 LITERARY ESSAY

Readings for English 1301 with a Ninja

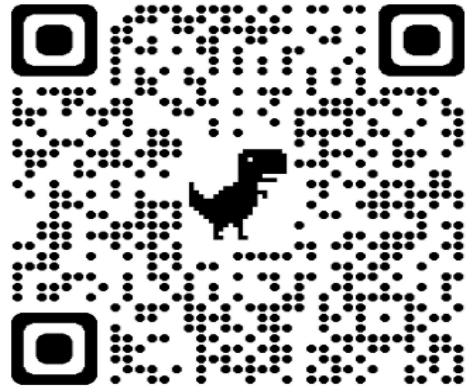
**Practice Stories
with Questions to Consider**

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[Quote Sandwich handout](#)



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The Pedestrian

By Ray Bradbury

1951

To enter out into that silence that was the city at eight o'clock of a misty evening in November, to put your feet upon that buckling concrete walk, to step over grassy seams and make your way, hands in pockets, through the silences, that was what Mr. Leonard Mead most dearly loved to do.

He would stand upon the corner of an intersection and peer down long moonlit avenues of sidewalk in four directions, deciding which way to go, but it really made no difference; he was alone in this world of A.D. 2053, or as good as alone, and with a final decision made, a path selected, he would stride off, sending patterns of frosty air before him like the smoke of a cigar.

Sometimes he would walk for hours and miles and return only at midnight to his house. And on his way he would see the cottages and homes with their dark windows, and it was not unequal to walking through a graveyard where only the faintest glimmers of firefly light appeared in flickers behind the windows.

Sudden gray phantoms seemed to manifest upon inner room walls where a curtain was still undrawn against the night, or there were whisperings and murmurs where a window in a tomblike building was still open.

Mr. Leonard Mead would pause, cock his head, listen, look, and march on, his feet making no noise on the lumpy walk.

For long ago he had wisely changed to sneakers when strolling at night, because the dogs in intermittent squads would parallel his journey with barkings if he wore hard heels, and lights might click on and faces appear and an entire street be startled by the passing of a lone figure, himself, in the early November evening.

On this particular evening he began his journey in a westerly direction, toward the hidden sea.

There was a good crystal frost in the air; it cut the nose and made the lungs blaze like a Christmas tree inside; you could feel the cold light going on and off, all the branches filled with invisible snow.

He listened to the faint push of his soft shoes through autumn leaves with satisfaction, and whistled a cold quiet whistle between his teeth, occasionally picking up a leaf as he passed, examining its skeletal pattern in the infrequent lamplights as he went on, smelling its rusty smell.

“Hello, in there,” he whispered to every house on every side as he moved. “What’s up tonight on Channel 4, Channel 7, Channel 9? Where are the cowboys rushing, and do I see the United States Cavalry over the next hill to the rescue?”

The street was silent and long and empty, with only his shadow moving like the shadow of a hawk in midcountry.

If he closed his eyes and stood very still, frozen, he could imagine himself upon the center of a plain, a wintry, windless Arizona desert with no house in a thousand miles, and only dry river beds, the streets, for company.

“What is it now?” he asked the houses, noticing his wrist watch.

“Eight-thirty P.M.? Time for a dozen assorted murders? A quiz? A revue? A comedian falling off the stage?”

Was that a murmur of laughter from within a moon-white house? He hesitated, but went on when nothing more happened.

He stumbled over a particularly uneven section of sidewalk.

The cement was vanishing under flowers and grass.

In ten years of walking by night or day, for thousands of miles, he had never met another person walking, not once in all that time.

He came to a cloverleaf intersection which stood silent where two main highways crossed the town.

During the day it was a thunderous surge of cars, the gas stations open, a great insect rustling and a ceaseless jockeying for position as the scarabbeetles, a faint incense puttering from their exhausts, skimmed homeward to the far directions.

But now these highways, too, were like streams in a dry season, all stone and bed and moon radiance.

He turned back on a side street, circling around toward his home.

He was within a block of his destination when the lone car turned a corner quite suddenly and flashed a fierce white cone of light upon him.

He stood entranced, not unlike a night moth, stunned by the illumination, and then drawn toward it.

A metallic voice called to him: "Stand still. Stay where you are! Don't move!" He halted. "Put up your hands!"

"But-" he said.

"Your hands up! Or we'll Shoot!"

The police, of course, but what a rare, incredible thing; in a city of three million, there was only one police car left, wasn't that correct?

Ever since a year ago, 2052, the election year, the force had been cut down from three cars to one.

Crime was ebbing; there was no need now for the police, save for this one lone car wandering and wandering the empty streets.

"Your name?" said the police car in a metallic whisper.

He couldn't see the men in it for the bright light in his eyes.

"Leonard Mead," he said.

“Speak up!”

“Leonard Mead!”

“Business or profession?”

“I guess you’d call me a writer.”

“No profession,” said the police car, as if talking to itself.

The light held him fixed, like a museum specimen, needle thrust through chest.

“You might say that, ” said Mr. Mead.

He hadn’t written in years. Magazines and books didn’t sell any more.

Everything went on in the tomblike houses at night now, he thought, continuing his fancy.

The tombs, ill-lit by television light, where the people sat like the dead, the gray or multicolored lights touching their faces, but never really touching them.

“No profession,” said the phonograph voice, hissing. “What are you doing out?”

“Walking,” said Leonard Mead.

“Walking!”

“Just walking,” he said simply, but his face felt cold.

“Walking, just walking, walking?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Walking where? For what?”

“Walking for air. Walking to see.”

“Your address!”

“Eleven South Saint James Street.”

“And there is air in your house, you have an air conditioner, Mr. Mead?”

“Yes.”

“And you have a viewing screen in your house to see with?”

“No.”

“No?” There was a crackling quiet that in itself was an accusation.

“Are you married, Mr. Mead?”

“No.”

“Not married,” said the police voice behind the fiery beam, The moon was high and clear among the stars and the houses were gray and silent.

“Nobody wanted me,” said Leonard Mead with a smile.

“Don’t speak unless you’re spoken to!”

Leonard Mead waited in the cold night.

“Just walking, Mr. Mead?”

“Yes.”

“But you haven’t explained for what purpose.”

“I explained; for air, and to see, and just to walk.”

“Have you done this often?”

“Every night for years.”

The police car sat in the center of the street with its radio throat faintly humming.

“Well, Mr. Mead,” it said.

“Is that all?” he asked politely.

“Yes,” said the voice. “Here.” There was a sigh, a pop. The back door of the police car sprang wide. “Get in.”

“Wait a minute, I haven’t done anything!”

“Get in.”

“I protest!”

“Mr. Mead.”

He walked like a man suddenly drunk. As he passed the front window of the car he looked in. As he had expected, there was no one in the front seat, no one in the car at all.

“Get in.”

He put his hand to the door and peered into the back seat, which was a little cell, a little black jail with bars. It smelled of riveted steel. It smelled of harsh antiseptic; it smelled too clean and hard and metallic. There was nothing soft there.

“Now if you had a wife to give you an alibi,” said the iron voice.

“But-“

“Where are you taking me?”

The car hesitated, or rather gave a faint whirring click, as if information, somewhere, was dropping card by punch-slotted card under electric eyes. “To the Psychiatric Center for Research on Regressive Tendencies.”

He got in. The door shut with a soft thud.

The police car rolled through the night avenues, flashing its dim lights ahead.

They passed one house on one street a moment later, one house in an entire city of houses that were dark, but this one particular house had

all of its electric lights brightly lit, every window a loud yellow illumination, square and warm in the cool darkness.

“That’s my house,” said Leonard Mead.

No one answered him.

The car moved down the empty river-bed streets and off away, leaving the empty streets with the empty side-walks, and no sound and no motion all the rest of the chill November night.

Questions to Consider: “The Pedestrian”

1. Merriam-Webster defines the digital divide as "the economic, educational, and social inequalities between those who have computers and online access and those who do not." In Bradbury's story, the digital technology prevalent is television. How does that society view those that don't engage in television? How is that similar or different to attitudes about digital technologies today?
2. What is Mr. Mead's punishment for not engaging in society? Is that something we see informally in our society in terms of our digital culture, and how does it hurt or harm someone socially?
3. What social trends does Ray Bradbury observe and see as potential problems for the society in "The Pedestrian"?
4. In the short story "The Pedestrian" when the author says the television touched the faces of the people but never really touched them. What does he mean by this? How is this similar to or different from those who engage in technology today?
5. Find the sentences and phrases that at first suggest that Leonard Mead is the only person living in this setting in A.D. 2053. What is Bradbury saying about what it means to actually live?
6. What is Mr. Leonard Mead's attitude toward the shows on the television? What does this show about who he is? **OR** What does this insinuate about this society?
7. How does Bradbury suggest that television could be used to suppress people's thoughts and ideas in the story "The Pedestrian"? How does that happen with current technologies, or how do we resist that with current technologies?

Resistance

by Tobias S. Buckell

2017

Four days after the coup Stanuel was ordered to fake an airlock pass. The next day he waited inside a cramped equipment locker large enough to hold two people while an armed rover the size and shape of a helmet wafted around the room, twisting and counter-rotating pieces of itself as it scanned the room briefly. Stanuel held his breath and willed himself not to move or make a sound. He just floated in place, thankful for the lack of gravity that might have betrayed him had he needed to depend on locked, nervous muscles.

The rover gave up and returned to the corridor, the airlock door closing behind it. Stanuel slipped back out. The rover had missed him because he'd been fully suited up for vacuum. No heat signature.

Behind the rover's lenses had been the eyes of Pan. And since the coup, anyone knew better than to get noticed by Pan. Even the airlock pass cut it too close. He would disappear when Pan's distributed networks noticed what he'd done.

By then, Pan would not be a problem.

Stanuel checked his suit over again, then cycled the airlock out. The outer door split in two and pulled apart.

But where was the man Stanuel was supposed to bring in?

He realized there was an inky blackness in the space just outside the ring of the lock. A blotch that grew larger, and then tumbled in. The suit flickered, and turned a dull gray to match the general interior color of the airlock.

The person stood up, and Stanuel repressurized the airlock.

They waited as Stanuel snapped seals and took his own helmet off. He hung the suit up in the locker he'd just been hiding in. "We have to hurry, we only have about ten minutes before the next rover patrol."

Behind him, Stanuel heard crinkling and crunching. When he turned around the spacesuit had disappeared. He now faced a tall man with dark skin and long dreadlocks past his shoulders, and eyes as gray as the bench behind him. The spacesuit had turned into a long, black trench-coat. "Rovers?" the man asked.

Stanuel held his hand up and glyphed a 3-D picture in the air above his palm. The man looked at the rover spin and twist and shoot. "Originally they were station maintenance bots. Semi-autonomous remote operated vehicles. Now they're armed."

"I see." The man pulled a large backpack off his shoulders and unzipped it.

"So... what now?" Stanuel asked.

The gray eyes flicked up from the pack. "You don't know?"

"I'm part of a cell. But we run distributed tasks, only checking it with people who assign them. It keeps us insulated. I was only told to open this airlock and let you in. You would know what comes next. Is the attack tonight? Should I get armed? Are you helping the attack?"

The man opened the pack all the way to reveal a small arsenal of guns, grenades, explosives, and—oddly—knives. Very large knives. He looked up at Stanuel. "I am the attack. I've been asked to shut Pan down."

“But you're not a programmer...”

“I can do all things through explosives, who destroy for me.” The man began moving the contents of the pack inside the pockets and straps of the trenchcoat, clipped more to his belt and thigh, as well as to holsters under each arm, and then added pieces to his ankles.

He was now a walking arsenal.

But only half the pack had been emptied. The mysterious mercenary tossed it at Stanuel. “Besides, you're going to help.”

Stanuel coughed. “Me?”

“According to the resistance message, you're a maintenance manager, recently promoted. You still know all the sewer lines, access ducts, and holes required to get me to the tower. How long do you guess we have before it notices your unauthorized use of an airlock?”

“An hour,” Stanuel said. The last time he'd accidentally gone somewhere Pan didn't like, rovers had been in his office within an hour.

“And can we get to the tower within an hour, Stanuel, without being noticed?”

Stanuel nodded.

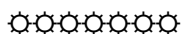
The large, well-armed man pointed at the airlock door into the corridor. “Well, let's not dally.”

“Can I ask you something?” Stanuel asked.

“Yes.”

“Your name. You know mine. I don't know yours.”

“Pepper,” said the mercenary. “Now can we leave?”



A single tiny sound ended the secrecy of their venture: the buzz of wings. Pepper's head snapped in the direction of the sound, locks spinning out from his head.

He slapped his palm against the side of the wall, crushing a butterfly-like machine perfectly flat.

“A bug,” Stanuel said.

Pepper launched down the corridor, bouncing off the walls until he hit the bulkhead at the far end. He glanced around the corner. “Clear.”

“Pan knows you're in Haven know.” Stanuel felt fear bloom, an instant explosion of paralysis that left him hanging in the air. “It will mobilize.”

“Then get me into the tower, quick. Let's go, Stanuel, we're not engaged in something that rewards the slow.”

But Stanuel remained in place. “They chose me because I had no family,” he said. “I had less to lose. I would help them against Pan. But...”

Pepper folded his arms. “It's already seen you. You're already dead.”

That sunk in. Stanuel had handled emergencies. Breaches, where vacuum flooded in, sucking the air out. He'd survived explosions, dumb mistakes, and even being speared by a piece of rebar. All by keeping cool and doing what needed to be done.

He hadn't expected, when told that he'd need to let in an assassin, that he'd become this involved. But what did he expect? That he could be part of the resistance and not ever risk his life? He'd risked it the moment one of his co-workers had started whispering to him, talking about overthrowing Pan, and he'd only stood there and listened.

Stanuel took a deep breath and nodded. "Okay. I'm sorry."

The space station Haven was a classic wheel, rotating slowly to provide some degree of gravity for its inhabitants so that they did not have to lose bone mass and muscle, the price of living in no gravity.

At Haven's center lay the hub. Here lay an atrium, the extraordinary no-gravity gardens and play areas for Haven's citizens. Auditoriums and pools and labs and tourist areas and fields, the heart of the community. Dripping down from the hub, docking ports, airlocks, antennae, and spare mass from the original asteroid Haven had taken its metals. This was where they floated now.

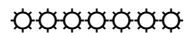
But on the other side of the hub hung a long and spindly structure that had once housed the central command for the station. A bridge, of sorts, with a view of all of Haven, sat at the very tip of the tower. The bridge was duplicated just below in the form of an observation deck and restaurant for visitors and proud citizens and school trips.

All things the tower existed for in that more innocent time before.

Now Pan sat in the bridge, looking out at all of them, both through the large portal-like windows up there, and through the network of rovers and insect cams scattered throughout Haven.

One of which Pepper had just flattened.

Stanuel knew they no longer had an hour now.



Pepper squatted in front of the hatch. "It's good I'm not claustrophobic."

"This runs all the way to the restaurant at the tower. It's the fastest way there."

"If we don't choke on fumes and grease first." Pepper scraped grease off the inside.

Stanuel handed him a mask with filters from the tiny utility closet underneath the pipe. He also found a set of headlamps. "Get in, I'll follow, we need to hurry."

Pepper hauled himself into the tube and Stanuel followed, worming his way in. When he closed the hatch after them the darkness seemed infinite until Pepper clicked a tiny penlight on.

Moving down the tube was simple enough. They were in the hub. They were weightless. They could use their fingertips to slowly move their way along.

After several minutes Pepper asked, voice muffled by the filter, "so how did it happen? Haven was one of the most committed to the idea of techno-democracy."

There were hundreds of little bubbles of life scattered all throughout the asteroid belt, hidden away from the mess of Earth and her orbit by distance and anonymity. Each one a petri dish of politics and culture. Each a pearl formed around a bit of asteroid dirt that birthed it.

"There are problems with a techno-democracy," muttered Stanuel. "If you're a purist, like we were, you had to have the citizenry decide on everything." The sheer amount of things that a society needed decided had almost crushed them.

Every minute everyone had to decide something. Pass a new law. Agree to send delegates to another station. Accept taxes. Divvy out taxes. Pay a bill. The stream of decisions became overwhelming, constantly popping up and requiring an electronic yes or no. And research was needed for each decision.

“The artificial intelligence modelers came up with our solution. They created intelligences that would vote just as you would if you had the time to do nothing but focus on voting.” They weren't real artificial intelligences. The modelers took your voting record, and paired it to your buying habits, social habits, and all the other aspects of your life that were tracked in modern life to model your habits. After all, if a bank could use a financial profile to figure out if an unusual purchase didn't reflect the buyer's habits and freeze an account for safety reasons, why couldn't the same black box logic be applied to a voter's patterns?

Pepper snorted. “You turned over your voting to machines.”

Stanuel shook his head, making the headlamp's light dart from side to side. “Not machines. Us. The profiles were incredible. They modeled what votes were important enough—or that the profilers were uncertain to get right—so that they only passed on the important ones to us. They were like spam filters for voting. They freed us from the incredible flood of meaningless minutiae that the daily running of a government needed.”

“But they failed,” Pepper grunted.

“Yes and no...”

“Quiet.” Pepper pointed his penlight down. “I hear something. Clinking around back the way we came from.”

“Someone chasing us?”

“No. It's mechanical.”

Stanuel thought about it for a moment. He couldn't think of anything. “Rover?”

Pepper stopped and Stanuel collided with his boots. “So our time has run out.”

“I don't know.”

A faint clang echoed around them. “Back up,” Pepper said, pushing him away with a quick shove of the boot to the top of his head.

“What are you doing?”

“We've come far enough.” Four extremely loud bangs filled the tube with absurdly bright flashes of light. Pepper moved out through the ragged rip in the pipe.

Another large wall blocked him. “What is this?”

Stanuel, still blinking, looked at it from still inside the pipe. “You'll want the other side. Nothing but vacuum on the other side.” Had Pepper used more explosive they might have just been blown right out the side of Haven.

“Right.” Pepper twisted further out, and another explosion rocked the pipe.

When Stanuel wriggled out and around the tube he saw trees. They'd blown a hole in the lawn of the gardens. They carefully climbed out, pushing past dirt, and the tubes and support equipment that monitored and maintained the gardens and soaked the roots with water.

“Now what?” Stanuel asked. “We're going to be seen.”

“Now it gets messy,” Pepper said. He pulled Stanuel along toward the large elevator at the center. “I'm going with a frontal assault. It'll be messy. But... I do well at messy.”

“There's no reason for me to be here, then,” Stanuel said. “What use will I be? I failed to get you there through the exhaust pipes. Why not just let me go?”

Pepper laughed. “Not quite ready to die for the cause, Stanuel?”

“No. Yes. I'm not sure, it just feels like suicide, and I'm not sure who that helps.”

“You're safer with me.” Pepper launched them from branch to branch through the trees. Now that curfews were in effect, no families perched in the great globe of green, no kids screaming and racing through the trees. It was eerily silent.

Pepper slowed them down in the last grove of trees before the elevators at the core of the gardens. As they gently floated towards the lobby at the bottom of the shaft three well-built men, the kind who obviously trained their bodies up on the rim of the wheel, turned the corner.

They carried stun guns. Non-lethal, but still menacing.

Stanuel heard a click. Pepper held out a gun in each hand. Real guns, perfectly lethal.

“I'd turn those off,” Pepper said to the men, “and pass them over, and then no-one would get hurt.”

They hesitated. But then the commanding voice of Pan filled the gardens. “Do as he says. And then escort him to me.”

They looked at each other, unhappy, and tossed the guns over. Pepper threw them off into the trees. “You're escorting us?”

The three unhappy security men nodded. “Pan says you have an electro-magnetic pulse weapon. We're not to provoke you.”

Stanuel bit his lip. It felt like a trap. These traitors were taking them into the maw of the beast, and Pepper, as far as he could see, looked cheerful about it. “It's a trap,” he muttered.

“Well of course it is,” Pepper said. “But it's a good one that avoids us skulking about, getting dirtier, or having to shoot our way through.” The mercenary followed Pan's lackeys into the elevator. He turned and looked at Stanuel, hovering outside. “And Pan's right. I do have an E.M.P device. But if I trigger it this deep into the hub, I take out all your power generating capabilities and computer core systems.”

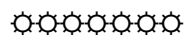
“Really?” Stanuel was intrigued.

Pepper held up a tiny metal tube with a button on the end. “If I get to the tower,” Pepper said. “I can trigger it and take out Pan, while leaving the rest of the station unaffected.”

Stanuel had weathered five days of his beloved Haven under the autocratic rule of Pan, the trickster.

He'd travel with Pepper to see it end, he realized.

He pulled himself into the elevator.



For five days Haven's populace had a ruler, a single being whose word was law, whose thoughts were made policy. Pan stood in the center of the command console, its face lit by the light of a hundred screens and the reflections off the inner rim of Haven's great wheel.

Pan wore a simple blue suit, had tan skin, brown eyes, and brown hair. His androgynous face and thin body meant that had he stood in a crowd of Haven's citizens, he would hardly have been noticed. He could be anybody, or everybody.

He also flickered slightly as he turned.

“My executioner and his companion. I'm delighted,” Pan said. “If I could shake your hand, I would.” He gave a slight bow.

Pepper returned it.

Pan smiled. “I've been waiting for you two for quite a while. I apologize for sending the rover up the exhaust pipe.”

Pepper shrugged. “No matter. So what now? I have something that can take you out, you have me surrounded by nasty surprises...”

Pan folded its arms. “I don't do nasty surprises, Pepper. I'm not a monster, contrary to what Stanuel might say. You have an E.M.P device, and if you were to set it off further down the tower, you would shut all Haven down. True, I have backup capabilities that mitigate that, but your device presents a terrible risk to the well being of the citizenry. With the device and you up here, the only risk is to me.”

An easy enough decision, Stanuel thought. Trigger the damn device! But Pepper glanced around the room, maybe seeing traps that Stanuel couldn't. “If you don't do nasty surprises, what stops me from zapping you out, right here, right now?”

“I would like to make you an offer. If you'd listen.”

Pepper's lips quirked. “I wouldn't be much of a mercenary if I just accepted the higher bid in the middle of the job. You don't get repeat work very often that way.”

Pan held its hands up. “I understand. But consider this, I am, indirectly, the one who hired you.”

Stanuel had to object. “The resistance...”

“I run it,” Pan smiled. “I know everything it does, who it hires, and in many cases, I give it the orders.”

Stanuel felt like he'd been thrown into a freezing cold vat of water. He lost his breath. “What do you mean? You infiltrated it?” They had lost, even before they'd started.

Pan turned to the mercenary. “Stanuel is bewildered, as are many, by what they created, Pepper. I'm merely the amalgamated avatar of the converged will of all the simulations made to run this colony. The voter simulations kept taking up energy, so the master processing program came up with a more elegant solution: me. Why run millions of emulators, when it could fuse them all into a single expression of its will that would run the government?”

“A clever solution,” Pepper said.

“A techno-democracy, even more so than the vanilla kind, is messy. Dangerously so. With study committees and votes on everything, things that needed to be done quickly didn't get done in time.

“So the emulations decided to put forward a bill, buried in the middle of some other obscure administrivia. The vote was that emulations be given command of the government.”

Stanuel stepped forward. “We woke up and found that in a single moment all of Haven had been disenfranchised.”

“By your own desires and predictive voting algorithms,” Pan said. “In a way, yes. In a way, no.”

Stanuel spit at the dictatorial hologram in front him. “Then the emulators decided that a single amalgamation, an avatar, and expression of all their wills, would work better. So then even our own voting patterns turned over their power.”

“Not surprising,” Pepper said. “You didn't have the maturity to keep your own vote, you turned it over to the copies of yourselves. Why be surprised that the copies would do something similar and turn to a benevolent dictator of their own creation?”

Pan looked pleased. “Dictators aren't so bad, if they're the right dictator. And it's hard coded into my very being to look out for the community. That's why I look like this,” it waved a hand over its face. “I'm the average of all the faces in Haven. Political poll modeling shows that were I to run for office, if would be almost guaranteed based on physiological responses alone.”

Stanuel looked at Pepper. “Pan may have infiltrated, but you were still paid to destroy it. Do it.”

“No,” Pan said. “You might pull that trigger. But if you do, you destroy what the people of Haven really wanted, what they desired, and what they worked very hard to create, Pepper, even if they didn't realize they consciously wanted it.”

"I've heard you get the government you deserve," Pepper said. "But this is something else. They created their own tyranny..."

"But Pepper, I'm not a tyrant. If they vote as a whole to oust me, they can do it."

Pepper moved over to the one of great windows to look out at the inside rim of Haven. Thousands of distant portholes dotted the giant wheel, lit up by the people living inside the rooms across from them.

"Look around you," Pan implored. "There are plenty who like what I'm doing. I'm rebuilding parts of Haven that have been neglected for years. I'm improving agriculture as we speak. I've made the choices that were hard, got things into motion that just sat there while people quibbled over them. I am action. I am progress."

Stanuel kicked forward and Pepper glanced back at him. "I think Stanuel objects."

Pan sighed. "Yes, a few will be disaffected. They will always be disaffected. That was why I created outlets for the disaffected, because they are a part of me as well. But my plea to you, Pepper, is not to break this great experiment. I can offer you more money, a place of safety here whenever you would want it, and Haven as a powerful ally to your needs."

Pepper nodded and sat in the air, his legs folded. "I have a question."

"Proceed."

"Why do they call you Pan?"

"They call me Pan because it's short for panopticon. An old experiment: if you were to create a round jail with a tower in the center, with open cell walls facing it, and the ability to look into every cell, you would have the ultimate surveillance society. The panopticon. In some ways, Haven is just that, with me at its center."

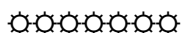
Pepper chuckled. "I'd half expected some insane military dictator wearing a head of antlers calling himself Pan."

Pan did not laugh. It leaned closer. "Pepper, understand me. This is not your fight. I'm the naturally elected ruler of Haven. The choice to remove me, that isn't yours. I did not bring you here to destroy me, but for other reasons."

"The choice?" The word affected Pepper in some way Stanuel could not figure out. He looked over at Stanuel. "Then if you're a benevolent ruler, you will escort me off Haven, leave Stanuel alive, and move on to other things. After all, it was your orders that set Stanuel down this path."

"Of course. It's that or a sentence in one of Haven's residential rooms. You'll be locked in, but comfortable. There do have to be ways to handle such things. Exile, or confinement."

"Okay, Mr. Pan. Okay. My work here is done." Pepper moved towards Stanuel with a flick of his feet. "Come on Stanuel, it's time to leave the tower."



Stanuel could hardly look Pepper in the eye. "I can't believe you left there."

"Pan made a good argument."

"Pan offered to pay you more. That's all."

"There's that, but I won't take it." Pepper scratched his head. "If I destroyed Pan, what would you do?"

Stanuel frowned. "What do you mean?"

“You said the emulations wouldn't be allowed to hold direct control, earlier. Does that mean you'd allow the emulations to come back and decide votes for you?”

“One assumes. We might have not gotten them right, but if we can fix that error, things can go back to the way they were.”

Pepper unpacked his suit and stepped into it. It crinkled and cracked as he zipped it up. “And then I'll be back. Because you'll repeat the same patter all over again.”

“What?”

“For all your assumptions, you're not quite seeing the pattern. Deep down, somewhere, you all want Pan. You don't want the responsibility of voting, you want the easy result.”

“That's not true,” Stanuel objected.

“Oh come on. Think of all the times princes and princesses are adored and feted. Think of all the actors and great people we adore and fawn over.”

“That doesn't make us slavish followers.”

Pepper cocked his head. “No, but we still can't escape the instincts we carry from being a small band of hunter-gatherers making their way across a plain, depending on a single leader who knew the ins and outs of their tiny tribe and listened to their feedback. That doesn't scale, so we have inelegant hacks around it.

“Stanuel, you all created a technological creature, able to view you all and listen to all your feedback, and embody a benevolent single tribal leader. Not only was it born out of your unconscious needs, even your own emulations overwhelmingly voted it into power as sole ruler of Haven.”

Stanuel raised his hand to halt Pepper. “That's all true, and over the last four days we've argued around all this when we found out about the vote. But, Pepper, whether perfect or not, we can't allow a single person to rule us. It goes against everything we believe in, everything we worked for when we created Haven.”

Pepper nodded. “I know.”

“And you're going to walk away.”

“I have to. Because this wasn't some power grab, it was the will of your people. There was a vote. Pan is right, it is the rightful ruler. But,” Pepper pointed at him, “I'm not leaving you empty-handed.”

“What do you mean?”

He handed over the backpack and pressed a small stick with a button into Stanuel's hand. “The E.M.P device is in the backpack. You won't get anywhere near the tower to take out just Pan, but if you triggered it in the hub after I leave, it will shut Haven down. Pan will have backups, and his supporters will protect the tower, but if enough people feel like you do, you can storm it with the guns in that pack.”

“You're asking me to... fight?”

“You know your history. The tree of liberty needs to be watered with some blood every now and then. Thomas Jefferson, I think, said that. Most of your ancestors fought for it. You could have kept it, had you just... taken the time to vote yourself instead of leaving it to something else.”

“I don't know if I can.” Stanuel was bewildered. He'd never done anything violent in his life.

Pepper smiled. “You might find Pan is more willing to fold than you imagine. Think about it.”

With that, he stepped into the airlock. The door shut with a hiss, and the spacesuit faded into camouflage black as Pepper disappeared inside whatever stealth ship had bought him to Haven.

Stanuel stood there. He pulled the backpack's straps up over onto his shoulders and made his way toward the gardens, mulling over the mercenary's last words.

A hologram of Pan waited for him at the entrance to the gardens, but no goons were nearby. Stanuel had expected to be captured, with the threat of a long confinement ahead of him. But it was just the electronic god of Haven and Stanuel.

“You didn’t understand what he meant, did you?” Pan said. It really was the panopticon, listening to everything that happened in Haven.

“No.” Stanuel held the switch to the E.M.P in his hand, waiting for some trick. Was he going to get shot in the head by a sniper? But Pan said it didn’t use violence.

Maybe a tranquilizer dart of some sort?

“I told you,” Pan said, “I also created the resistance.”

“But that doesn’t make any sense,” Stanuel said.

“It does if you stop thinking of me as a person, but as an avatar of your collective emulators. Every ruling system has an opposition; the day after I was voted into power, I had to create a series of checks and balances against myself. That was the resistance.”

“But I was recruited by people.”

“And they were recruited by my people, working for me, who were told they were to create an opposition tame as a honey trap.” Pan flickered as he walked through a tree. An incongruous vision, as Stanuel floated through the no gravity garden.

“Why would you want to die?”

“Because, I may not be what all of you want, just what most of you want. I have to create an opportunity for myself to be stopped, or else, I really am a tyrant and not the best solution. That is why Pepper was hired to bring the E.M.P device aboard. That was why, ultimately, he left it with you.”

“So it’s all in my hands,” Stanuel said.

“Yes. Live in a better economy, a safer economy, but one ruled by what you have created. Or muddle along yourselves.” Pan moved in front of Stanuel, floating with him.

Stanuel held up the metal tube and hovered his thumb over the button. “Men should be free.”

Pan nodded sadly. “But Stanuel, you all will never be able to get things done the way I can. It will be such a mess of compromise, personality, mistakes, wrong choices, emotional choices, mob rule, and imperfect decisions. You could well destroy Haven with your imprecise decisions.”

It was a siren call. But even though Pan was perfect, and right, it was the same song that led smart men to call tyrants leaders and do so happily. The promise of quick action, clean and fast decisions.

Alluring.

“I know it will be messy,” Stanuel said, voice quavering. “And I have no idea how it will work out. But at least it will be ours.”

He pressed the button and watched as the lights throughout Haven dimmed and flickered. Pan disappeared with a sigh, a ghost banished. The darkness marched its glorious way through the cavernous gardens toward Stanuel, who folded up in the air by a tree while he waited for the dark to take him in its freeing embrace.

Questions to Consider: Resistance

- It's clear that Pan does rule well. Why does Stanuel push the button in the end? What does this show about his view of democracy? Use evidence from the story to support your claim.
- What does the way that Pan is set up to create a resistance cell/group say about this society's view of democracy? Use evidence from the story to support your claim.
- What connections do you see between the way the leader in the story, Pan, came about and any of our current desires in society, and what does that say about humanity or what problems does that present?

Just Do It

by Heather Lindsley

2006

Sometimes the only warning is a flash of sun on the lens of a sniper's scope. Today I'm lucky enough to catch the mistake.

Funny, I think as I duck down behind the nearest parked car, I don't feel lucky.

The car is a tiny thing, an ultra enviro-friendly Honda Righteous painted an unambiguous green. Good for the planet, bad for cover. Ahead there's an H5 so massive and red I first take it for a fire truck. The selfish bastard parked illegally, blocking an alley, and for that I'm grateful.

I take a quick look at the roof of the building across the street before starting my dash to the Hummer. Halfway there a woman in plastic devil horns steps into my attempt to dodge her and her clipboard.

"Would-you-care-to-sign-our-petition-in-favor-of-the-effort-against-ending-the-Florida-blockade?" Damn, she's good. She sounds like she trained with a preBay auctioneer.

I feint left and dart right, putting her between me and the Shooter and countering, "I-already-signed-it-thanks!" so she won't follow. It's not the first lie I've told today, and it's not likely to be the last.

Temporarily safe behind the Hummer, I lean against the heavily tinted windows of the far back seat door, glad to be standing upright but panting and sweating and wishing I wasn't wearing the black jumpsuit I reserve for funerals and job interviews. Nanofiber, my ass—it can't even keep up with a little physical activity on a hot April day.

I start the long walk toward the front bumper, figuring I'll duck into the alley and continue on my way one block over. It seems like a good plan until another Shooter steps out of the alley.

This one has a pistol. I'd go cross-eyed if I tried to look down the barrel.

"Oh, come on," I say, backing away slowly. "Not the face."

He dips the barrel down a bit. I sigh and start pulling the zipper at the high neck of my jumpsuit in the same direction. I stop just shy of revealing cleavage—I'll get shot in the face before I give this punk an eyeful.

He shrugs and fires.

"You little bastard!" I yell at his retreating back as I pull out the dart out of my forehead. "I want your license number!"

Of course he doesn't bother to stop. They never do.

The itching starts almost immediately, and I reflexively reach up and touch the bump above my eyes. I know better than to scratch it, but I do anyway. The scratching releases a flood of chemicals that create a powerful and specific food craving. I brace myself.

French fries. French fries from the den of the evil clown, where they don't even pretend to use potatoes anymore. I hate those french fries, so golden and crispy on the outside, so moist and fluffy on the inside—

No no no no no, I do not want them.

I manage to get past the first shadow the clown casts on my route with relative calm, but by the second the itching is more intense and all I can imagine are french fries. Disgusting, nasty, tasty, delicious french fries.

This is not the way to walk into a job interview.

The site of my two o'clock appointment looms in the office tower ahead...right behind a third opportunity to relieve the craving. I keep moving, trying not to think about how well the diabetes-inducing corn syrupy sweet ketchup complements the blood pressure-raising salty savor of the fries.

I make a full circuit through the revolving doors of the office building before going back toward the object of my involuntary, chemically-enhanced desire.

The food odors pounce immediately and I can almost feel the molecules sticking to my clothes. Even if I turn around now I'll smell like fast food.

"Let's get this over with," I say unnecessarily to the credit scanner, staring it down until it greenlights my ability to pay for food I don't really want. None of the automat compartments contain fries, which is unusual, so I punch hard at a picture of french fries on the order panel. The dents in the panel tell me I'm not the only customer who feels antagonistic about buying food here.

It shouldn't take more than a minute or two for the fries to appear in a compartment, so when they don't I start pounding on the automat.

"Hey, hurry it up!" I yell, scratching furiously at the bump on my forehead.

The back door of the empty fry compartment slides open. An eye stares out at me.

"What?"

"Fries. I need fries."

"We're out of fries," the voice behind the automat says.

"How can you be out of fries? You've got Shooters out there making people crave the damned things!"

"That's why we're out."

"Doesn't the head office coordinate this stuff?"

The eye blinks twice and the door slides shut.

It's 1:47, enough time to go back to the second place if I hurry. But I don't hurry. I pace in the street, muttering to myself like a lunatic. It's almost five minutes before I quit trying to control the craving and dash back the way I came.

I give the next credit scanner an especially dirty look, then yank open the one compartment with fries. I stop only to pump blobs of ketchup from the dispenser. On my way out I pass an old man scratching his arm as he raves through an open compartment, "How can you be out of fish sandwiches?!"

"Try the one on Third and Pine," I say around a mouthful of fries.

CraveTech's offices are both plush and haphazard, the combined result of a record-breaking IPO and the latest design fad: early dot-com retro. I arrive sweaty, greasy, nauseated, and thoroughly pissed off. I smile at the receptionist anyway, a fashionably sulky blonde boy seated in a vintage Aeron chair behind a desk made out of two sawhorses topped with an old door and a crystal vase.

"Alex Monroe. I have a two o'clock with Mr. Avery."

"Two o'clock?" he says pointedly. It's 2:02. "Have a seat. Something to drink while you're waiting?"

"Water please." I'll probably retain every ounce. Damn salty french fries. There are pills that reduce bloating, of course—they sell them out of the same automat—but I wouldn't hand over any more of my money.

I've just taken my first sip when a young man pops out of the office. He looks like a typical startup manager: handsome, well-dressed, and almost certainly in over his head.

"Ms. Monroe, welcome!" He bounds up to me, hand extended. During the handshake he nods toward my forehead. "Ah, I see you use our products!" He laughs heartily at his own joke. I laugh back. I want this job.

"It's a wonderful time to be in chemical advertising, Ms. Monroe," he says, shepherding me into his office. I notice he has a proper desk. "We have some exciting deals in the works. Exciting, exciting deals."

"Really?" I say, distracted by the fry-lump in my stomach.

"Oh, yes. Now that the Supreme Court has reversed most of those class action suits, Shooters don't have to be stealthy. We've had to discontinue the tobacco lines for the time being, but otherwise it's open season on consumers."

I make another effort to join in his laughter, and reaching toward the bump on my head add, "It certainly is effective."

"Indeed." He smiles like he loaded the dart himself. "So," he says, picking up my resume, "I see your background is in print."

"Yes, but I've done some work in fragrance influence, and I'm very interested in chemical advertising's potential."

"Well, it is a growing field, plenty of room for trailblazers, especially with campaigns as impressive as these." He sets my resume aside. "And of course we still have quite a lot of synergy with print."

He pulls an inch-long Crave dart out of a drawer and drops it on the desk between us. I resist the urge to cringe at the sight of the wretched thing.

“What do you see?” he asks.

I want to say a menace, but instead I tap the delivery barrel and give the context-appropriate answer. “Unused ad space.”

Suddenly he’s a schoolmaster who has finally found a bright pupil in a classroom full of dunces.

“Exactly, Ms. Monroe. Exactly. No square millimeter wasted, that’s what I say.” He leans across the table and whispers conspiratorially, “We’re looking at co-branding an AOL-Time-Warner-Starbucks Lattepalooza Crave with a Forever Fitness session discount.”

“Wow.”

“Yes. Coupons on the darts. How does that grab you?”

“Coupons.”

“Tiny coupons, like the ones on swizzle sticks. Can’t you just see it? You get Stuck, so you want the product, but you’re also concerned about your weight. The coupon helps. The coupon tells you the provider cares about your concerns. It tells you they understand.” He leans back in his chair, my cue to speak.

“Interesting. But I’d go log-in rebate rather than immediate discount. Same message, same coverage, easier on the bottom line.”

He leans forward again. “I like the way you think, Ms. Monroe.”

I hate meeting at Sandra’s house—her cats are constantly trying to climb up on my lap, I suspect because they know I’m allergic to them. But Sandra is my best friend from college, and also my cell leader, so I usually end up here at least once a week.

“Whoa, right in the forehead,” she says when she opens the door.

“Yeah, and that’s an ugly one on your neck.”

“That’s a hickey.”

“Oh, uh, sorry. Or congratulations, I guess.”

“Eh,” she shrugs, heading to the kitchen.

I follow. “Um, aren’t you a little old to be getting those?”

“Maybe, but Liam’s not too old to be giving them.” Sandra has a taste for idealistic young revolutionaries.

She starts to make herbal tea, and I know enough not to ask for coffee instead.

We take the tea to the lumpy, cat-hair covered futon in the living room. “How’d the interview go?”

“Shaky start. Getting Stuck really threw me off. But I did manage to laugh at his jokes, and, sad to say, I’m more or less qualified.”

“You do speak their language.” Sandra likes to remind me that I’ve only recently stopped being part of the problem. “So where do things stand?” she asks.

“He said he only had one more interview, and he’d call to let me know by the end of the week.”

“Did you pick up anything while you were there?”

“Not much about the next formulas. AOL-Time-Warner-Starbucks is definitely in now, but that’s old news.”

“But you think you can get access? The job’s in the right division?”

“Close enough. Marketing’s always looking over R&D’s shoulder. It won’t seem strange for me to be poking around.”

“What should I tell our counter-formula development contact?”

“Well, assuming I get the job, and assuming I can start right away, three weeks. Maybe four. It’ll depend on their security.”

She seems satisfied with this answer. “What about Plan B? How’s the Mata Hari routine working on our favorite evil genius?”

“He’s not evil—he’s just oblivious.”

She raises an eyebrow at this. “Dangerously oblivious.”

“Yes, I know.” I concentrate on picking cat hair off my clothes. “It’s going fine. Fourth date tonight. Expensive place. I should get going, actually.” I rise and head for the door. She stops me and stares pointedly at my forehead.

“Alex, don’t forget—he’s the enemy.” I consciously abort an eye-roll and substitute a smile.

“Dangerously oblivious genius equals enemy. Check.” I give her a little wave as I step outside.

“Which restaurant are you going to?” Sandra asks from the doorway.

“Prima.”

Her brow furrows. “Don’t they serve real meat?”

“Oh yes—and I’ll be ordering a steak,” I say, taking a moment to enjoy her disapproving look.

“I’ll have the porterhouse. Rare, please.”

“Make that two,” Tom says. “Mine medium.”

“Very good,” the server says. “I’ll be back with the first course shortly.” He gives us each a prim little four-star nod as he leaves.

I put my elbows on the white linen tablecloth and rest my chin on my interlaced fingers. “I’m not sure I can ever love a man who would ruin a perfectly good steak.”

Tom leans into the candlelight, too. “And I’m not sure I can trust a woman who likes her meat nearly raw.”

“I guess we’ll just have to stay together for the sex.”

“And the children.” He raises his glass to his lips.

“I’m not having sex with children, you pervert.”

He chokes on his wine and grabs his napkin. I have to give him points for not looking around to make sure we haven’t been overheard.

“If I’d known you’d be shooting wine out of your nose I’d have suggested a Merlot,” I say as innocently as I can manage.

“How,” he coughs, “did I ever end up in such hazardous company?”

We met accidentally at a Better Living Through Chemistry Expo sponsored by Dow-DuPont-Bristol-Myers-Squibb-PepsiCo six weeks ago.

Actually, we met at a hotel bar during the expo.

I was running my report through my head, thinking about the companies that had the most bad news for humanity in the works. He sat down a couple of barstools away. We traded a little eye contact and a few shy smiles in the dim light.

“So which of these evil bastards are you representing?”

He laughed. “CraveTech.”

“Ooh, a startup. Exciting.”

“Yeah. What about you?”

“Me? I’m with an underground group whose goal is to liberate people from the tyranny of corporate chemical dependence.”

“Huh. Underground, you said?”

“Yeah, we’re not very good at that part.” I was already starting to like his laugh, especially since it came so easily. “Actually, I freelance in marketing.”

“Anything I might have seen?”

“Maybe the Junior Chemical Engineer campaign.”

“Big Molecules for Little Hands.”

“That’s the one,” I said, suddenly aware I was twisting a lock of my hair around my finger. I reached for my drink.

“Wasn’t there a massive judgment against them in one of the last big class action suits?”

“No, that was Union-Pfizer’s My First Exothermic Reaction. Ours were just repackaged Make Your Own Cologne! kits left over from the last Queer Eye reunion tour.”

“Clever.” He got up and closed the barstool gap between us.

“Despicable. So what do you do at CraveTech?”

“I run the place.”

“That’s funny,” I said, laughing until he slid the nearest candle closer. I squinted at a face I almost recognized from the cover of Time-Newsweek.

“Where are your glasses?”

“Contacts tonight.”

“You lose the glasses when you don’t want to be recognized.”

“Yeah, sort of a—”

“Reverse Clark Kent thing.”

He smiled. “Yeah,” and I could feel his geeky little heart reaching out for mine.

Tonight he’s wearing his glasses. He looks cute in them.

“Of course, the really exciting work is in BeMod,” he says, slicing into his steak.

“BeMod?” This seems like a good time to play dumb.

“Behavior Modification. The current dart formulas can make you want to ingest something—food, smoke, whatever. That’s easy.”

“Easy for you,” I say, raising my eyebrows toward the bump that’s only just beginning to subside.

At least he has the grace to look embarrassed. “Yeah, uh, sorry about that. But once we ship the darts to the providers, it’s pretty much out of CraveTech’s hands. I get Stuck sometimes, too, you know.”

I spell the word oblivious in my head over and over, until I lose the urge to punch him. It takes four this time, so I miss hearing yet another version of the “If It Wasn’t CraveTech It Would Be Someone Else” speech.

“...anyway, it’s all just using the chemistry of cravings,” he’s saying when I’m calm enough to tune back in. “The fact that you have to buy whatever it is you’re craving is an indirect consequence.”

“An awfully profitable indirect consequence.” I stab at a carrot.

“Yes, but see, that’s the thing: the next big leap in the field is to skip straight to the buying part. We’ve been doing some promising work with what happens to brain chemistry when avid consumers watch successful commercials.”

“So you’re trying to synthesize a drug that will make people go out and buy MaxWhite toothpaste.”

“Or a pair of NeoNikes. Or an H5.”

“Oh my God.”

He unleashes his Boy Genius grin. “Yeah. Pretty cool, huh?”

I report for my first day at CraveTech two weeks later. No one mentions that I’m dating the CEO, so I assume it hasn’t gotten out. Still, I make a point of flirting back—and being overheard—when the cute young thing from Amazon-FedEx-Kinko’s makes her rounds.

I’d told Tom up front that I was applying for the job. He was encouraging, but made it clear he would keep his nose out of it and leave things to Avery. I never see Tom around the marketing department—he seems more interested in making things than selling them, which I find endearing. If only he weren’t making such awful things.

I flop down on Sandra’s futon, narrowly missing a cat.

She puts mugs of tea on the table while I fish an envelope out of my shoulder bag. When she sits down next to me I place the envelope in her hands.

“Information,” I say, “and lots of it.” She takes the data card out of the envelope and peers at it as if she can actually make sense of what it contains.

“This is all of them?”

“All the formulas set to come out over the next six months. I’ve included a release schedule so you’ll know which ones will be hitting the street first.”

“The counter-formula team is gonna love this.”

“They’d better. That little card represents a month of my life spent smiling at banalities and pretending to care about other people’s kids.”

“So you’re ready to quit.” She sounds relieved.

“I’d love to, but I don’t think I can just yet. I still haven’t found anything about this BeMod stuff. Tom keeps going on about it, but as far as I can tell it hasn’t surfaced in R&D.”

“Isn’t it weird that he seems so serious about BeMod but you can’t find it at CraveTech?”

I laugh. “So you think he has some other lab where he’s developing chemicals he can use to rule the world?”

“Maybe not rule the world...just make a shitload of money, which is close enough.”

“You’re serious, aren’t you?”

She shifts uncomfortably on the futon. “It just seems like he’s been awfully specific about this BeMod stuff, and it hasn’t turned up where you’d expect it.”

“So what are you suggesting?”

“I think it’s time you broke up with him, and maybe quit CraveTech, too.”

“But if this BeMod stuff is in development somewhere, we’ll need to get our hands on it and start on a counter-formula as soon as we can.”

“That’s true.”

“And how do we do that if I don’t keep seeing him?”

The cell leader finally overcomes the college buddy. “Just be careful. Don’t get too attached to him.”

I pick up the data card, two gig worth of corporate espionage. “Does this seem like I’m too attached?”

I arrive at Tom’s place in a foul mood. He doesn’t notice. Dangerously oblivious.

We’re still in the foyer when he starts in about BeMod.

“I read a fascinating study on endorphins today. Apparently you can stimulate—”

“Can we please talk about something other than biochemistry?” I drop my bag on the floor.

He looks surprised and a little hurt. “I’m sorry, I didn’t realize I was boring you.”

“You’re not boring me.” I reach for his hand as we head into the living room. “I just think we have more in common than an interest in BeMods and DC Comics.” I haven’t gotten around to telling him I prefer Marvel.

He stops and pulls me back toward him. “I love you.”

“See, there you go—I love me, too. Something else we have in common.”

“Oh for God’s sake,” he sighs, collapsing on his down-filled couch. “I’m trying to be serious.”

“I know.” I sit down next to him. “I’m sorry. I just need a little more time.”

“Okay. A little more time,” he says, kissing my forehead and then my neck.

It’s so easy to kiss him back.

The next time I go to Sandra’s, she has a data card for me.

“What’s this?”

“A press release. It says CraveTech is voluntarily recalling all darts because internal studies have shown them to trigger heart attacks and strokes in a small but substantial segment of the population. We need you to send it out from the CraveTech network.”

I hand the card back to her. “The media will figure out it’s bogus.”

“Not before the stock plummets. We’re set up to trigger a small drop, and the release will do the rest.”

“You know I won’t be able to go back there after I send it. They’ll trace it to me.”

“I know.” I stare hard at her. She doesn’t flinch.

“And I’ll have to break up with Tom.”

“You need to do that anyway, Alex. It’s been almost six months. That’s too long. It’s longer than you’ve dated anyone for real.”

“Sandra, sending this press release is just throwing a brick through a window. It’s meaningless in the long run. They’ll replace the window. The stock price will readjust.”

“But it will slow them down.”

“Sandra, if it isn’t CraveTech, it’ll be...”

“What?”

“Nothing.” I take the card.

“You’ll send the release?”

“I’ll send it.”

I put the few personal items that decorated my cubicle in a gym bag. I never had a picture of Tom on my desk. That would have been indiscreet.

The press release glows on my work station, one twitch away from every major news outlet and the most incendiary of the minor ones. If I had a picture of Tom, I might have stared at it for a while, maybe even whispered Sorry to it.

But I don’t, so I just flick Send.

I’ve come to break up with him. “You’re early,” he says when he greets me at the door. “I’ve planned something special.” I follow him out to the deck.

“For what?”

“Our six-month anniversary.” There’s a cloth-covered table and dining chairs, a silver champagne bucket on a stand. “In another twenty minutes there’ll be a sunset, too.” He says this like he paid for it. “But, you know,” he looks oddly apologetic, “you’re early.”

“Tom, I’m sorry...we’re not going to have a six-month anniversary.”

I expect anything from him but the crooked Boy Genius smile I love so much. “This isn’t about the press release, is it?”

I sit, a little inelegantly in my surprise.

“What press release?”

He laughs. “This conversation will probably be less awkward if I just tell you I had all your CraveTech e-mails routed to me before they went out.”

Ah.

“I was a little surprised that you actually sent it, but I do understand. I appreciate your beliefs. I love you for them—I want you to know that.” He pours us each a glass of champagne. “And besides, you really helped me out with those counter-formulas.”

I pick up my glass then set it down again. “Helped you out?”

“Absolutely. My people made a couple of tweaks, though. Your group’s design wasn’t very cost effective at the ten thousand unit level.”

“Wait, wait, wait. You’re going to manufacture our counter-formulas?”

“Oh, yes. The marketing campaign has been in development at a subsidiary company for weeks now. And the profit projections—Alex, you wouldn’t believe it. Apparently people really, really hate the craving darts.” Oh, my oblivious darling. “They’ll pay twice the cost of the actual food just to make the cravings go away.”

“But they won’t have to. We’ll be giving away the counter-formula for free.”

“Funny thing about that—the research shows people would rather pay a couple of bucks to get the antidote from a familiar, trusted source than from a pack of anarchists with a habit of blowing up buses.”

“Blowing up buses? What’re you—”

“Oh, it’s a little something we’re planning for the fourth quarter. Disinformation campaign. It’s ready for implementation now, but we think everyone will be more inclined to actively hate you during the holidays.”

“Hate me?” I stand up and start backing toward the door.

“Well, not you, your group. They’ll love you, Alex. You’ll be managing my charitable organizations, giving away money to worthy causes right and left. People love that. And they’ll love me. People love CEOs whose wives do that kind of stuff.”

“Wives?” He brings out a pistol and fires a dart into my neck. I pull out the dart and drop it on the ground.

“What was in that thing?”

He answers my question with a question as he pops open a little black velvet box.

“Alex, will you marry me?”

“Tom, you sneaky little—” I say, lost between admiration and horror. “Will I marry you?”

Of course I will.

Tom Jr. has a hard time waking up in the morning. He gets it from me, not his father, who is always up before the crack of dawn, especially since the BeMod wide dispersal aerosol went into production.

“Tommy, wake up!” I call out toward his room. There’s only a muffled grumbling in response.

I walk up to his doorway. “Really, Tommy, it’s time to get going. You’ll be late for school.”

He rolls over, groaning, but doesn’t make a move to get up. I unholster my parenting gun and shift the round in the chamber from Go to Bed to Wake Up.

“Get up, Tommy,” I say as I draw a bead on his sleep-tousled head. “I’m not going

Questions to Consider: Just Do It

1. In this story, many things are being critiqued: capitalism, consumer culture, corporations, chemistry. Choose one of these and discuss what the story is saying about it.
2. In an interview, when asked to talk about what this story is about, Lindsley says,
Well, in the past I've only gone so far as to say it's about desire and how easy that is to manipulate. But I'll go a bit further and say I was also thinking about the ongoing conflict between doing the right thing and doing the comfortable, pleasurable thing. It's about having a compelling excuse to take the easier, ethically questionable path. To just do it and blame somebody else's chemical. To think of yourself as the good guy while enjoying champagne with the bad guy.
Choose one of these ideas and discuss how it's shown in the story and how it shows itself in our world today.