

## OFFLINE

A guy sits in a room. Alone. Offline.

He hasn't left the house at all in three days now. And, really, that's fine with him. He's done this before: locked the door and found a seat and forgotten the world outside. This is no different.

He has food for a week or two, and that's just what's in the kitchen. He's got clean clothes to last out the year, should he care enough to keep putting on new outfits every day; at the moment, he doubts he will.

He has pills. He's supposed to take them twice a day. That, his psychiatrist assures him, will keep him functioning as normal. Whatever *normal* means; he's never seen a definition he liked very much.

He's literally surrounded by things to do. Activities. From jigsaw puzzles to an Xbox. From stressballs to a SoloFlex. He's not in the mood right now.

It's the rain, he supposes. His mood has always been affected by the weather, usually plummeting from bad to worse. And this rain would get anyone down: cold and relentless, barraging the roof above the ceiling. It hasn't stopped in some sixty hours now.

He wonders how much water there is on the planet. People say that three quarters of the surface is covered in the stuff. But that's area, not volume. He wonders how many gallons it is. How many—what—teralitres. Petalitres. Or whatever's larger still than that. Because every last millilitre seems to be landing atop his house this week.

He's not hungry. He ate a bag of Oreos earlier—a few hours ago. He tried to drink some milk with them, but the stuff had gone bad. Most everything in the fridge, in fact, is about spoiled now. He doesn't care about that either. He's got canned soup and boxes of spaghetti and fettuccine and things; he's got several cases of soda, and a couple cases of beer. There might even be some vodka in the freezer.

He's not supposed to drink anything that heavy with the pills he's supposed to be taking twice a day. If he wants vodka, he should wait until the antidepressants are out of his system, and stop taking them for a while.

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He breathes a bit. And he looks at the ashtray on the table. If and when he leaves the house again, it'll probably be to go out and get some smokes; he's got a carton or two here in the house, but that won't last more than maybe a week.

It's something he hates about smoking: cigarettes eventually run out, and he has to leave the house to get more. Since they abolished the vending machines in the nineties or so, it's also been impossible to avoid having to talk to people out there. And he's really not interested in talking to anyone now. Not with the state of the world today. He can predict the calibre of babble he'd run into out there, from the endless rain to the political climate to....

Maybe he can't guess what people are saying out in the world; he doesn't want to try.

The newspaper on the table next to the ashtray is three days old now. He found it at the apron of his driveway on the morning of *June 17, 2011*. The front page is the typical sort of whimpering which got him to try to cancel his subscription: ecological disaster imminent, NASA begging for funding, calls for action in sheltering a predicted record number of homeless this summer. He didn't renew the paper when the subscription expired last month, but the paperboy never stopped throwing one into his driveway every morning; at least he's not paying for it anymore.

Imminent ecological disaster, indeed: a landfill's worth of unread newspapers clogging his driveway. Evidence that no one puts any thought into anything at all.

He stares at the paper, wondering why NASA keep asking for money. To throw robots at planets humans can't reach in under a month? In less time than it takes to die of gamma radiation sickness along the way? Someone—Clarke or Bradbury or Asimov or someone—once wrote that *Earth is far too fragile a basket to keep all our eggs in*, or something. Be that as it may, it remains the only basket within current reach.

He smirks at his own invented irony. If the rain outside were leading to a global flood, NASA could do nothing about it: they can't launch anything unless they've got a perfectly sunny Floridian morning on which to start the countdown.

He doubts that sunshine in Florida would improve his mood much. Even if torrential rain here in Colorado is making it worse.

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He wonders again how much water is on the planet. Not enough, he's certain, to swallow up Evergreen, here on the western outskirts of Denver. Even if it could, the mountains just a few miles further to the west peak at some fourteen thousand feet. Today, late in June, summer officially about to begin, the snow atop even the fourteeners is beginning to melt; on average, it doesn't come back until September. Though the ecological weirdness of the modern world could have everything at this latitude plunged into an ice age three months from now. Or so people are saying.

Personally, he's a little too old and a lot too cynical to believe it, let alone to care. He hasn't believed in or cared about much since the hippies proved themselves laughably wrong about Nixon burning the planet in atomic fire if elected in 1968. *Fool me once*, he thinks. Not that he was particularly fooled in 1968, when he voted for Tricky Dick anyway.

He sits in a room, and in his sixties. Alone. Offline.

He's never hated computers, or even misunderstood them. Other people now his age may never have figured them out; but he got the point back in the seventies, and embraced the microcomputers of the eighties, and the laptops of the nineties. He's always liked computers; he's been less thrilled with everyone else using them. Tweets and pokes and pings and E-mails and Private and Instant and Direct Messages. People, people, people; popup, popup, popup; blah, blah, blah. He's been offline for three days now. To be honest, he's not even certain the 'net is still working out there in the world. And he's in no hurry to find out.

Probably, his netbook's battery is dead anyway. He can't remember when he last recharged it. Except that it's likely in the car, ready to charge through the increasingly retronymous cigarette lighter socket; it's probably been close to a week since he last used the netbook at all.

He finds it suddenly funny that he'd have a netbook. Not a sublaptop, but a *netbook*. A computer primarily designed to go anywhere, use few resources, WiFi into anything and everything, and keep him in constant touch with seven billion unlikeable little people.

At some point, he'll have to go out for smokes. And soda and beer and whatever else. Then he'll find out whether the netbook works, he supposes. For now, he lights one of his cigarettes; he's still

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got three or four hundred of them left. And a handful of cheap, disposable lighters here and there around the house.

He blows smoke at the Camel, the end glowing greyish, yellowish red, pondering. Everything else wrong in the world today, no one wants him assaulting them with a cigarette. The world could be minutes from ending—earthquakes and hurricanes and fucking lava falling from the sky—and all anyone would ask is that he takes it outside to smoke. He hates people. And he hopes lava falls on them from out of the sky.

He's got pills for this. But he's also got vodka. And the vodka sounds better to him.

He looks at Friday's paper without reading it. Airline safety tranquillity diagrams spelling doom for the planet if NASA's taxbased pledgedrive doesn't net them a trillion bucks by about yesterday. A related story windowed into the article about the comet discovered six weeks ago. More about that on 3A, if he cares.

He doesn't. It's old news. The hippies all screamed that the comet was going to hit the planet, exterminating all life—even bacteria—in an instant. As always, they were wrong.

He wonders whether that idiot paperboy threw a paper at him today. Not much; only a little. He wonders whether today's paper, if any, would have a retraction. *We're terribly sorry: the hippies were wrong again; bacteria's doing just fine, and we're all very embarrassed here at the Denver Post, we can tell you.* Probably not.

Sirens drive by outside. It sounds more like a firetruck than an ambulance, but he can't be sure. He's sure only that bacteria aren't driving the thing. The hippies were wrong. Again.

His cigarette has burned its way down to the filtre. And it wasn't really enough. It never is when he's thinking deeply about something. He feels like lighting another; he knows that brings him one cigarette closer to the need to go out into the endless rain [and lava?] for more. And the people he'd have to deal with. Firemen and hippies and bacteria. He puts off lighting another, for now.

He wonders what's on fire out there. What *could* be on fire, in all this rain. Whether it could set *his* house on fire, forcing him outside. Maybe there'll be a paper in his driveway tomorrow with the answers.

Friday's paper had no answers. Nothing useful, anyway. Just

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the common bullshit they fill newspapers with. NASA want money; the world's heading for a massive climateshift ice age thing; new comet with a forgettable alphanumeric name, five kilometres wide—close to three miles wide, for the morons reading the *Post*. Massive elliptical orbit; last crossed Earth's path during the Triassic Period; expected to be highly visible over most of the southern hemisphere early on Saturday, one to four in the morning, Greenwich Mean Time, dodging the planet by less than half a million miles—an astronomical near miss.

Hippies screaming about fissures, and calving, and other things hippies know about comets no one's seen since the Carnian Age.

He lights another cigarette after all. The saltwater stench of the rain is giving him a headache now. Probably. Or the lack of antidepressants mixed with the lack of vodka. And of course the weather.

He wonders how much water is on the planet. How many petalitres, or whatever. He thinks maybe it'll be something of a problem, if it doesn't stop raining soon.

Water commonly has three states. Liquid, obviously enough—the shit falling from the sky, onto his roof, driving him mad. And gas, as it boils to steam, as he supposes it's doing down in the Tropic of Capricorn, sizzling at the perimeter of the crater. And ice. Cold, cold ice.

He sits in the room, alone and offline, at over seven thousand feet above what was last time he checked sealevel, an ocean or four of water raining down upon him from a muddy cloudcover likely separating the planet from the sun for the next thousand years, debating whether to light a cigarette, that much sooner having to go fight the other survivors for more.