



Sabbatical

A Short Story

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“Now you too can have the long awaited rest you deserve” cooed the advert on TV. Michael sat back in his chair with a sigh. The brochure had already arrived a week ago. He had just enough money for the basic package – a five year term in deep sedation where he would be completely unconscious, fed, watered and looked after while all the fears, worries and craziness passed him by. The bit that really appealed was that not only did they suspend just your body and mind, but they took care of it that all of your financial outgoings simply froze for the time you were under and restarted when you woke up. Debts would not mount up, your house would be completely safe and even your job, provided the company still traded, was held open.

Michael admitted he'd had enough lately, bored in his job but tied to the income, fearful of the on-going economic crisis globally destroying everything, and realising he was completely alone, he grew more and more nervous, jumping at his own shadow. He wanted everything to stop, just stop, only for a little while, giving him time to rest. His life savings would be gone in one go, but he would wake feeling strong, refreshed and ready to start building those back up again. That was the theory. Still, probably best to sleep on it one more time before making any decisions. It was late anyway.

At three in the morning the silence was shattered; an alarm screeching in the street outside, ripping through the darkness with its piercing shrill. It wasn't the first time recently. No-one could sleep around here anymore and this was the quietest neighbourhood in the county. Michael stumbled out of bed, angling the embedded blinds to see out. A gang of youths in over-sized clothes stood around hooting with laughter at the damage to a nearby car. Its windows had each been shattered inwards, the lights smashed and Michael doubted the electrics would ever be the same again. Wiring hung from the dash illuminated by the sparking and sputtering of its synthetic death throes. They hadn't even stolen it and smashed it up on the flyway somewhere. Plain and utterly mindless vandalism.

The phone was nearby. He pushed the button and said "police" then as the automated operator took him through the call, he used just the keywords "car, vandalism, gang, present". The android voice gave him reassurances that law enforcement would be on the scene momentarily.

Two police cars hovered onto the scene three minutes later. Not even bothering to run, the kids loitered a moment longer then dispersed, strolling off in various directions. No arrests. Not even any questions. That was just typical. Michael watched everything from the relatively safety of his upstairs window. He realised too late that from his position the youths, could see him as clearly as he could see them. Rather than jump back and betray himself even further, he stood his ground. As they broke off in ones and twos, one of the hoodlums paused, looking up at him, and pointed. No, he wasn't pointing. The kid was miming a gun and took an imaginary shot. Michael wondered how far the reprisals would actually go. Nowhere was safe anymore, not even the traditionally 'good' areas. He was probably ok for tonight but after that, it was anyone's guess. He was pretty confident his car wouldn't end up all but destroyed in the name of fun. There were other ways though to make him stew.

Sleep eluded him after the night's commotion and he didn't dare drive himself to work. Negotiating three lanes and three layers of traffic was out of the question. Auto-glide was the slower option but far less dangerous and besides, his mind was anywhere but behind the controls. The parking pod at the office was highly secured. What about his house though? Would it be alright? A state of the art security system protected it from intruders, and the fire suppression system would prevent catastrophic damage, but fire being fire, damage would still be done. The gangs might do their thrill-seeking at night, but Michael did his worrying during the day and today he worried even more than usual.

In his tiny office, chewing the end of his pen aggressively and absentmindedly, Michael let out a yelp when the boss walked in. He was late submitting his report and he was now caught doing nothing constructive to remedy the situation. Not able to promise anything today, blustering about lack of sleep, incomplete figures and revising approaches bought him an extension of one day.

Now he had to revise the approaches to live up to his claims as well as complete the report. The figures were fine and it was a calculated guess that the boss wasn't aware of that. He decided to work the rest of the day from home where he would be more at peace and able to concentrate, knowing what was happening to his house.

Hovering home, he was glad to see the trashed car from last night gone. Of course, now the insurance premiums for the entire area would go up again and the only ones that wouldn't end up paying would be those kids and their parents. Michael considered there must be certain advantages to being disadvantaged. No knock-on effects could bring down the value of your assets if you had none to speak of and in fact the more those disenfranchised people dragged down the neighbourhoods, the more level they imagined the playing field became. The only ones that got hurt, so they believed, were the ones at the top; the haves and not the have nots. Michael was hanging on desperately somewhere in the middle and came closer and closer to have not status all the time. He couldn't see how that was fair.

For a very short time historically speaking, maybe 50 years or so, things had seemed close to Utopia. It took a while for the world government to settle in but when it did, the pressures resolved by having one centre of power for all nations made everything so much easier. Employment high, taxes low, food plentiful and the standard of living higher than ever before or since. People had money in their pockets and the crime rate fell to its lowest since records began. The world was almost at peace. Just a few minor conflicts remained in places where war was a more natural state than peace. Human nature almost overcame its most base motivations. For that brief time, history envied the present.

About fifteen years ago, a sudden change struck. Fossil fuels completely ran out, not that anyone should have been surprised, and renewable energy still could not supply the demand. Most people managed because most people had lived with one eye on their energy consumption for decades. The costs soared for everyone so that even those using little power felt the pinch. Businesses failed because overheads sky-rocketed. Vehicles that didn't run on oil couldn't always be charged. People stopped making journeys to out-of-town shopping areas that had completely

replaced the high-street. Consequently more businesses folded, people often didn't have the things they needed and went hungry. They shipped their food in, sharing the massively hiked-up delivery costs with family and neighbours. Still there was less food per household. People with empty bellies, unable to even turn on the TV were easily roused to anger and looked for someone to blame.

Assaults, burglaries, robberies, murder all went from an all-time low per capita to an all-time high. Things settled in a few years to a point where those businesses that had survived would continue to do so and the historical pattern of wealth versus deprivation re-emerged. That was when the gangs had appeared, smashing things up for the hell of it, destroying what someone else had because they couldn't have it for themselves. They couldn't remember how things were before the energy collapse and they didn't care.

In the wake of the crumbling idyll, companies like Sabbatex and DreamBreak had risen. People with money still in their pockets were encouraged to escape for a few years. At a cost of fifty thousand for a basic package, you didn't have to be a massively wealthy tycoon, but there were packages that lasted twenty years or more and cost millions. Some people reportedly took the chance of 'going away' for a couple of decades in the hope that when they 'came back' the crisis would be over and the world a safe and happy place again. Rumours spread of a political agenda behind the rise of these holidays. They were aimed primarily at the wealthy and self-made, often the kind of people in a position to cause problems for government; people able to run for office and win. Their 'frozen' finances might also be useful. As long as they were returned intact, who was to know they'd been used in the meantime?

Michael noticed the youngster hanging around outside. He appeared to be alone, doing absolutely nothing, just standing there in a slovenly slouch, glaring occasionally at nothing in particular. Was it the same one? He couldn't be sure. As the car auto-glided to a stop at the perfect distance from the garage door, he saw the kid was watching him. The teenager raised his eyes without moving his head and

stared at Michael with an angry scowl from beneath the peak of a navy blue baseball cap.

The kid was big, strong looking, and definitely had an agenda. All it took was the look to make it clear. Michael had never experienced intimidation like this before. It was just something that didn't happen, that is, until recently. He'd read about this sort of thing being common at the beginning of the last century and the end of the one before that, but in the 22nd Century it was unknown. His heartbeat grew loud in his head, blood pounding against his eardrums. His hands became cold and clammy. It took longer than it should to key in the door code on the in-car console and an unfeasible effort to look away from the kid. Once inside and out of sight, the drumming in his ears gradually slowed and stopped, but still he sat there for a good fifteen minutes listening and wondering what to do.

Working from home would have to wait a while. Too many uncomfortable thoughts jangled together, all talking at once, making it impossible to focus. What would happen with the youth outside? He couldn't be more than seventeen years old but seventeen, big, angry and reckless. That was a new and alarming realm of possibilities. Maybe nothing, maybe something minor, maybe a catalogue of small scale terror and vandalism. What would happen if this report was late again? That was quite easy to predict and would not be good.

Coasting along for months and frankly sick, the motivation to keep doing the same thing day in and day out was somewhat lacking. However, not doing the same thing day in and day out meant doing nothing and doing nothing meant earning nothing. It would take maybe two months tops to sink to the level of deprivation that drove those kids to take it out on others; on the people that hadn't quite sunk that far yet. What could happen in five years that a sabbatical brochure didn't tell you about? Well, the social and economic crises could get worse. He could wake up to a world where people fought and killed for a loaf of bread. He could also wake to a world where a solution was in place and the balance restored.

His mind sifted through the immediate issues and prioritised one worry at a time. What was the biggest problem? Losing his job. What could he do to prevent that? Finish the report and really make it shine. What was next? The youths. What

could he do about that? Nothing. Wait and see what happened, trust his security systems, stay in at night and call the police if necessary. So what was left? The sabbatical. It wasn't any more than a thought yet. Besides, anything could happen tomorrow, let alone in five years and whatever might happen in five years, it wouldn't be altered by his state of consciousness at the time. Taking a sabbatical was definitely the last thing on the list right now.

Deciding an order of worries somehow helped. Michael quickly got down to work on the report, starting from scratch with a new approach instead of rehashing the same old material. The thing with figures was you could use them to support any argument you felt like making. You could take increased sales figures and instead of using them to say everything was wonderful, you could use them to say that things could be better, although that was far too simplistic. You had to suggest how to make things better too.

For some time he'd thought the company far too relaxed with bad and late payers. He aimed to show that harsher penalties could ultimately boost revenue, discourage people from delaying or missing payments and at the same time raise projected income by inflating the amount owed. It could drive things forward for the company and also for him. He tabled the figures then produced forecasts based on the penalty impact. His forecasts illustrated revenue at ten per cent, twenty-five per cent and fifty per cent uptake on products versus marketing. For each band he produced a duplicate that factored in penalty payments in corresponding quantities. Naturally you could expect that some people still wouldn't pay, so he factored in the debt plus penalties into both a bad debt forecast and an expected earnings forecast.

For every projection, he created a chart – management always loved charts – and showed in several different ways how penalty charges could dramatically change the way people viewed the company. There were no alternative suppliers of health insurance anymore so no need for concern that they might simply go to a competitor. People perceived the company as a soft touch and took advantage of loosely enforced payment obligations. It didn't matter whether the board took any notice or not. The report presented things differently and illustrated new thinking. Even if they ignored the proposal, it reminded the management of Michael's

existence and might lead to better things. He applied every bit of his creativity to the whole thing stopping only when he was happy it looked the part as well as stating the facts. He read it over for errors two, three four times then sent the whole thing to his boss. It was dark outside and getting really late.

After a light supper and some TV it was almost time for bed. Funny how, when you got caught up in your own ideas, you could forget to eat and drink let alone sleep. If the company took up his ideas it could dramatically change their future prospects. It could dramatically change Michael's prospects! That sabbatical might not be needed after all. As if on cue, the advert aired again for Sabbatex – take a well-deserved break and leave everything to us. The prospect still appealed of sleeping for five years and waking up to walk straight back into his normal life with everything waiting for him just as he'd left it. The brochure lay on the coffee table where he'd thrown it, unread, so he picked it up.

“At Sabbatex we take care of your every need. Choose the break that suits you and leave the rest to us.” He read on. The basic package, the only one he could afford, placed you under heavy sedation for five years during which time you would be fed and hydrated intravenously whilst the mechanised toning bed on which you lay prevented muscle atrophy. Hygiene was managed and the option was there to keep your hair cut and your face shaved. “No more need for catheterisation” read the Medical Concerns footnote. Machines apparently took care of all of the unpleasant details. Out of curiosity Michael skipped ahead to the Premium Package.

For a whole lot more money that he would never be able to afford, you could be placed in complete suspended animation for up to fifty years. At the end of your break, you would be brought out of your frozen state unaged, no weight gain or loss, no muscle weakness, completely as you were when you went in. Not even a new grey hair. Michael wondered what benefit that could really have. He supposed certain illnesses that hadn't yet been cured might be curable or operable in fifty years, or your financial concerns might have evaporated or investments might have made you even more wealthy. You wouldn't come out feeling any worse, but you wouldn't necessarily feel any better either. At least with the basic package you were getting actual rest where your mind and body still functioned unconsciously and

could heal and regenerate so that when you reawakened you were ready to make a fresh start with your life. The thought of feeling refreshed and strong made him all the more aware of how tired and miserable he was. Throwing the brochure back down on the coffee table, he told the TV to switch off and went to bed.

An hour later he found he was still lying there awake, waiting for an alarm to go off or someone to start yelling in the street. He had a little less on his mind now that the report was in. Tomorrow would bring the verdict on his proposals and things at the office would either improve for him or stay the same, but at least they wouldn't get any worse. As he always did, he rehearsed conversations in his head. In the first, the boss walked in and told him great ideas but not what the company wanted. Thanks for the hard work and the flat forecast was great. In the second he was yelled at for getting above his station. It wasn't so much a conversation as a chastisement that ended in don't do it again. The third went much better and the boss not only congratulated him but gave him a rise and took him out to dinner. Gradually he began to drift off to sleep in spite of constantly revolving thoughts.

A loud crash reverberated through the house and the screech of a security alarm pierced the night. Michael sat bolt upright in bed, his heart hammering, stomach turning somersaults. It was his security system. Over the screaming siren he could hear an automated voice: "Intruder alert. Building secured. Intruder withheld. Police alerted. Police en route. Police en route. Police en route..." Intruder withheld, so no-one got in. But could he be sure? He could wait here to see if anyone appeared. He could wait for the police and let them investigate. Or he could go and see for himself. "Police imminent" said the voice.

He slipped out of bed, trembling from head to toe. Should he arm himself somehow? There was nothing to hand. The barbell he'd bought and never used except as a temporary shirt hanger, devoid of weights stood in the corner against the wall. Would he even be able to use it to any effect? Hefting it at least gave a sense of added strength. Whether the police were imminent or not, he'd have to get through the house and if the security system was mistaken, there might be someone in there with him, waiting for him to show. "Police on site" said the voice.

Moving as quickly as he dared and as quietly as he could, clutching the barbell like a life line, Michael made it to the door unassailed. Of course there could be someone in any of the rooms. The doors were all closed and he fully intended to let the police do the checking. Opening the door, a sense of relief washed over him at the sight of four armed officers. His shoulders dropped a little, he put down the barbell then spoke to a control panel on the wall. "Siren disarm code delta echo seven five eight nine four" and the screech fell silent. As the officers entered the house, Michael stepped outside. From the corner of his eye he saw movement. A way down the street, he thought he saw the youngster from earlier running away. His heart sank. So this was how it would be.

The window that formed most of the front wall was smashed in. Some glass remained in place along the top, jagged and hanging precariously. A fine grid of bright green stretched across the empty recess. There was not a point within the mesh more than 3mm wide. Michael nodded in grim appreciation of the security system. The laser grid activated immediately the window was impacted. Dual layering enabled bi-directional activation. Even if you put a mirror in the path of the lasers, there were more in the opposite direction. There would no doubt be some ingenious way past it, but no-one had yet managed to do it. It was such a rapid system that owners were required by law to place a warning in the window. If anyone had been part way through the recess, they would now be in a million little pieces. Despite the warnings there were incidents in the news every year - lost fingers, arms and worse. Michael snapped himself out of his thoughts and remembering he'd watched the perpetrator flee, went inside.

Once finally alone in the house again, Michael reviewed everything. No evidence they'd said. Nothing that could identify the culprit. He'd argued that he knew who'd done it and they must have seen him outside. Unless he had video surveillance footage, they were just going to leave it to him and his insurance to deal with. Michael couldn't help but wonder whether the neighbourhood was sneered at by law enforcement as much as by the disillusioned. It was not that wealthy an area. Not one person on this street had anything they didn't work hard to get and struggle

to keep. All they were guilty of was looking after their property and living honest and well managed lives. The despondency that had lifted when the report went in returned. A sabbatical resurfaced in his thoughts. But would the boss listen to the idea or fire him on the spot? Only one way to find out.

Unable and unwilling to leave the house until it was cleared up and weatherproof Michael called the boss to explain. The report was still unread; little point in discussing the contents and even less in raising the question of disappearing for five years. He was disappointed. Not only had he prepared answers to as many questions as he could imagine, he'd even rehearsed broaching the subject of a hypothetical sabbatical. The degree of nonchalance depended entirely on how the first conversation went, if and when it went.

Like everything else these days, glass was astronomically expensive, not to mention the cost of transporting it. The size of pane required made the insurance assessor blanch. She questioned the necessity of it being of equal quality and eventually Michael showed her the exact clause in his policy stating replacements of equal or better quality. He paid an extra amount on his premiums for that clause and was eligible only because theft from his property was virtually impossible. He pointed out the police report confirming vandalism, the most likely cause a projectile from outside the property line. There was absolutely no way Michael could have done any more to prevent it happening. He left out the part about the kid seeing him report the earlier incident. No-one could prove that anyway.

Eventually the assessor capitulated but that was the last of the good news. The insurers could not buy the glass for at least three days; installation might then happen for up to a week after that. Not only was Michael confined to the house for potentially a fortnight, but he was deprived of the anticipated face to face talk with the boss. On top of that, there was rain forecast and the laser grid kept out neither that nor the cold night air. Once upon a time he would have accepted the timeframe without argument. Stress overcame him and he found himself making quite clear and firm demands. Before he knew it the young woman, who clearly feared losing customers as much as paying for glass, was agreeing that the window recess would be boarded up inside and out today and that Michael would be compensated for the

impact on his energy consumption both to keep the place heated and leave the laser grid armed until the glass was fitted. The security form, he knew, would be out at an hour's notice day or night to supervise the glazier, ensure the system was safe and working perfectly then they would sign off the fitting. He felt a little better for getting at least some of what he wanted.

With the house weatherproofed and laser defence grid armed, he was able to go to the office the next day. In the meantime no-one called about the forecast report, no email arrived and Michael assumed his suggested plans were rejected. However, the silence almost certainly meant he hadn't been fired either. Working late to make up for lost time, the sleepless night weighed heavy on him. Whether he was exhausted, depressed or both, he couldn't decide. He did know it wasn't a good time to make any sort of decision, even about his own state of mind. Crunching data was one thing. Entering values and running automatic calculations didn't really need him to think a great deal. His job for the most part could be done by a very basic piece of software. Analysing the resulting figures was where his existence was justified. The suspicion was always there at the back of his mind that all of these calculations were his responsibility simply to fill his time.

If he took a sabbatical, even though Sabbatex promised to ensure your employment remained safe, there was a good chance that it would very quickly become clear that he really wasn't necessary. In the meantime though, all of the money he would have spent on food and energy would be accumulating interest instead of lining the pockets of someone else. Of course, his life savings would no longer exist so he really couldn't emerge better off than he went in except in health. The thought of not getting the rest he so very much needed made red hot tears stab behind his eyes. Blinking them away, Michael looked at the brochure where it still lay on the table. Mixed feelings flooded his mind. Longing, anger, despair, fear for the future, relief that today was over. Bed beckoned with the promise of temporary oblivion.

An uneventful night passed as far as Michael was aware. No alarms, on his property or the neighbours', woke him. Everything was still secure inside and after breakfast he felt more ready to face the world than he had in a couple of days. He almost looked forward to getting to the office and discovering how his ideas were received.

He backed the car out of the garage. As the front of the house came into view, so did the spray paint that stretched the full width of the building. His stomach dropped as though full of lead. Most of the paint was on the boards put up yesterday, but it was on the building too and as the garage door lowered, he saw the words in full. Scrawled in bright red with run off like dripping blood, DIE GRASS told him loud and clear this was no random act of vandalism. This was personal. With shaking hands he chose to switch to auto-hover and continue to work.

At the office, all seemed normal. It felt like he hadn't been here for weeks, not only a day and a half. Something had changed; he could feel it in the air. People avoided looking at him, no-one said hello, even the receptionist was unusually stiff and formal. None of it helped him to feel any easier. In his own tiny room, he shut the door firmly behind him and leaned against it closing out the unusual silence. Normal sounds of the outer office picked up once he was out of sight, reverberating through the hollow veneered plywood structure and paper-thin walls. Almost afraid to make a sound, Michael took a dozen deep breaths trying to undo the knot in his insides.

On his desk, when he finally found the nerve to move was a handwritten note, scrawled across the note tablet at a jaunty angle. The writing was familiar and the style of presentation. The boss didn't often write notes to anyone. Email and secretaries replaced the need to put pen to anything. Michael found it almost impossible to pick up the tablet, eyeing it with suspicion instead. He knew he was being pathetic. He knew an electronic message tablet was not going to bite, shoot or explode. At least he'd never heard of them exploding. An electronic message might end his current way of life though. The thought never occurred to him that he was paranoid and irrational. It never crossed his mind that he was on the verge of a very serious breakdown.

Eventually, letting out a heavy sigh, he picked up the tablet and read the note. "My office, soon as you get this." No clues about why. Trying to interpret the tone from a seven word note was like trying to tell the weather by sticking your head in the fridge. It wasn't in block capitals, which might be a good thing; it might denote a lack of anger, but it might also denote beyond caring. It wasn't an email or a printed page, so that might mean a friendly, personal touch; or it might mean the tablet was nearer and it was quicker to scribble something. Michael straightened his tie, smoothed his hair and steeled himself to run the gauntlet of the outer office.

The executive floor smelled of coffee and air freshener. Why, when the air conditioning could neutralise any odour, the headache-inducing scent of synthetic gardenia had to be pumped in volume through the vents remained a mystery. Someone was already in the boss's office and Michael thought for a moment he might escape until the Teflon hair-sprayed, red lipsticked secretary directed him to take a seat in the anteroom instead.

Waiting with pained anticipation in a leatherette bucket chair he was aware that his shirt and suit were clinging to the perspiration running down his spine in miniature rivulets of fear. The voices on the other side of the door were raised and tense but muffled enough that individual words didn't filter through. Michael ground his teeth until it his head ached.

After what felt like an eternity but the clock on the wall confirmed as twenty minutes, the door opened. A middle-aged man in a grey suit and red face walked hurriedly from the room, clutching an iFolio like a shield, keeping his eyes forward and his head up defiantly. Was it a bad omen? Was today a day of harsh words in the plush office beyond the foreboding fake oak door? Michael's jaws clenched so hard he felt a small sliver of enamel break off from a premolar. The boss gave his departing guest time to get clear then emerged into the anteroom, smiling. Nodding to Michael he signalled two minutes and disappeared in the direction of the secretary. Some of the tension drained from Michael's shoulders.

Returning with a traditional manila folder under his arm, the boss ushered Michael into the plush office, urging him to sit on the visitor side of the imposing

antique desk near the window. He sat there expectantly as papers were spread out over the 1990s desk, noticing that they were full colour printouts of his report. This might be good. No-one printed anything unimportant - paper was just too expensive. The boss finished shuffling the pages and smiled. Michael smiled back nervously, his palms sweating against the arms of the chair.

“What can I say Wheatley, this is excellent. Well worth the day’s extra wait. You’re wasted crunching data. The board is in agreement; we need your thinking at a higher level.”

“Really, sir?”

“Did no-one tell you yet? Jealous twirps. Michael, we want you on this floor. Forget number crunching, we want your strategic thinking.”

“This floor?” He was shaking from head to toe.

“Well we can’t move your executive suite into that tiny little room of yours, can we?”

“No sir, I suppose not, sir...” he stammered out and collapsed in tears.

The boss was shocked but listened as Michael explained himself through sobs and sniffles, the whole story from long before a sabbatical even occurred to him. He might be completely destroying his prospects but the relief of being appreciated instead of overlooked opened a floodgate that was not going to close again until everything came out. Eventually, it petered out.

“Well, Michael, the first thing I was going to suggest was that you take a holiday and come back when your new rooms are ready. Appears to me that you need it. I looked at your record, son, you haven’t taken a day off in more than seven years. You might get by like that in your old job, but we want so much more from you now. You’d burn out in no time. Take a break. Hell, take one of those sabbaticals, we can implement these ideas of yours while you’re away and when you come back you can start working on the next big thing.”

“Sir?”

“I mean it son, we’ll even pay for it. Use my bathroom to freshen up then let’s go to brunch.”

Michael was speechless. This had to be a wind-up.

Over brunch, Michael relaxed. The boss wanted to hear more of his ideas and he talked about the gaps in the product range that could be exploited, the outdated products that should be phased out, the lack of incentives to customers. The fact that the company was the only provider now did not increase the likelihood of people to use them. He talked enthusiastically while the boss he'd been so fearful of grinned like a Cheshire cat.

The talk turned to sabbaticals. One of the board members had just returned from five year deep sedation and said great things about it. Whilst out, he'd still been able to dream and his dreams had told him so much. Michael couldn't remember the last time he'd slept well enough to dream. The boss seemed excited about what ideas might come up after five years of good sleep. It seemed a done deal. When he returned, Michael would take up his office on the executive floor, collect his company car and find that his bank account had expanded quite amply. It was everything he could ever ask for. He went back to his dingy little office feeling excited then remembered he had to call someone about the threat on the wall at home.

The call to the insurance company did not go well. Because it was his second claim in as many days and the attack seemed provoked, they wanted a heavy excess payment. He tried to argue that whoever had smashed the windows must have seen the police arrive and taken that as motive for more damage. The guy on the phone was having none of it. Eventually, Michael was forced to agree to the excess which was still less than it would cost to call someone out independently. He relied on the promised raise and his sabbatical being paid for to ease the sting.

The security company agreed for only a small increase in his monthly payments to place the house under twenty-four hour surveillance. If the kid came back for more, there'd be evidence, assuming he dared do anything with cameras hovering around the property, others hidden, transmitting everything back to the monitoring centre.

Seeing a letter come through to his mail account, signed by the boss and two other board members, with the details of his new position plus paid-for sabbatical, he didn't stop to ask any questions and put in the call to Sabbatex.

By the time Michael got home, the cameras were in place. Saluting to the nearest one, he smiled as the camera bobbed in the air to acknowledge. Someone was watching already. Any motion, even a passing bird, alerted an operative to pay attention. He sighed to think he might sleep peacefully tonight.

Nothing woke him all night. He slept like he hadn't done in a very long time and the next morning wondered whether he was doing the right thing. Everything had fallen into place now. He might not really need to take a break. If he didn't though, everyone would be watching him, waiting for him to crack under pressure. His house was not the only thing under surveillance for the foreseeable future. When he looked outside, everything was as it should be. He resolved to go through with the sabbatical. It wouldn't cost him anything.

The day arrived for Michael to go to the Sabbatex resort. He drove out to the building about ten miles from the city, a large new building standing alone in the middle of nowhere. It was built of simple red and yellow brick with mock Corinthian columns at the entrance, a black tiled roof sloping down like a rain hat. Windows sat at regular intervals, mirrored on the outside reflecting the sky back at him. It looked like some vast cartoon character with hundreds of watery blue eyes, he thought, half expecting it to turn and look at him. Thick, black, cylindrical ventilation conduits were bolted on to either side for arms and two smaller, canopied entrances with large black metal doors looked like upturned feet where the building sat among carefully constructed grounds. If it had stood up and stretched its legs he would have been only mildly surprised.

Inside, a blonde receptionist purred at him while he booked in and minutes later a nurse in perky pink uniform with brilliant white sneakers that matched her highly polished teeth came to collect him. Following her onto a painfully slow horizontal travelator, he looked around. Everything gleamed. He placed the smell at somewhere between hospital and beauty salon. The travelator halted and began to rise vertically for three storeys then continued horizontally at right angles to the track on the ground floor. Artwork on the walls was bright and cheerful but otherwise unremarkable. He stopped looking and focused on where he was going.

The nurse pressed a button on a fob attached to her pocket and they stopped at a door in the corridor. Michael's name glowed from the plasma panel. So this was his room. A sense of claustrophobia crept over him. For five years, this room was his life. Once shut in, that was it for one thousand eight hundred and twenty-five days. Forty-three thousand, eight hundred hours. He couldn't remember how many minutes or seconds that came to. He felt a lump in his throat and wondered whether it was his heart or his stomach; both seemed to be jostling to get out.

Whatever the finer details were that the nurse and attending anaesthetist went over, he didn't take them in. Something about intravenous, high speed, so fast he wouldn't notice it. It could have been anything they were going to inject and he just nodded. It wasn't that his mind was elsewhere; it was nowhere. Finally he came to his senses and realised if he couldn't listen to carefully, slowly explained information, he probably wouldn't take in an executive meeting; maybe he really did need this. Too late anyway. The first shot went into his neck painlessly and he knew no more.

October 2180

Michael woke up and looked around cautiously. The light hurt his eyes and he felt groggy. He tried to sit up but his head swam. Something pulled at his scalp and his chest when he tried to move. He swiped at his torso, pulling whatever it was away. An alarm went off, high pitched and whining. At first he thought he was back in the house, waiting for someone to burst into his bedroom. The alarm cut off again quickly and the door opened. It all came back to him. He was at Sabbatex and if he was awake, it was the first time in five years. The blood roared past his ears. A nurse smiled brightly and carefully removed the remaining electrodes.

He sat up fully and was amazed at how strong he felt. Pulling on a robe handed to him, he noticed he was firm and toned. When he came in, he was out of shape; not fat, but with no discernible musculature. The anti-atrophy technology clearly worked and he realised what the electrodes were for. He'd imagined a

toning bed would be a moving machine and he guessed someone had probably told him but he'd not really heard. His clothes probably wouldn't fit now. Fresh coffee, fruit and juice arrived moments later. His taste buds were a little dull, probably to be expected, but food on his stomach helped his head to stop spinning.

After a long, hot shower he went looking for some clothes. In a closet near the window he found brand new shirts and suits. Someone must have measured him up and selected clothes that fit his new physique. He chose a lilac shirt, grey suit and dark grey silk tie. The mirror inside the closet door told him he looked like a new man. He certainly felt that way. Enthusiasm like he hadn't felt in twenty years radiated from his face, now free from the dark shadows and even some of the lines that had arrived with him. The nurse knocked at the door and came in, a doctor close behind her. A quick medical check which meant undressing again and then he was free to go back to his life.

Michael's vital signs were better than five years ago. Remarkably so. He'd slept for five years and emerged ten years younger. He remembered the boss telling about the executive who'd been full of great ideas after the same holiday and he hadn't believed it at the time. Michael was bursting with ideas and dying to get back to the office, to his new office, to start putting things into action. When Sabbatex let him go, they even gave him a complimentary digest of everything that had changed in the world over the last five years. He threw it on the passenger seat of the car and drove home.

The security cameras around the house looked new. One of them came right up to him and watched as he opened the door, scanned his retina and entered the pass code on the alarm pad. The phone rang seconds later. The security firm wanted to know who he was and how he came to have access to the house. Much apologetic laughter later they accepted that he'd been on sabbatical and returned a fitter, younger looking specimen. He'd still had to answer a lot of questions to confirm his identity and submit his retinal scan again, for both eyes this time. It made him all the happier to know he looked so much better and his property was still secure. Next he had to call work.

The boss was still in charge and pleased to hear from him. If he was ready, tomorrow would be a good time to come back as they were celebrating five years of incredible growth since Michael's plans were put in place. It all sounded very exciting. He decided to jot down some of his ideas now and check his finances then he thought he might go for a run. Running. That had been a long time ago too. Sabbatex was the best thing that had ever happened to him, the second best being the promotion he hadn't entered yet. He decided to leave the changes digest in the car where he'd forgotten about it until now and read it tomorrow. One of the letters waiting in his mailbox was from the insurance company demanding payment of the excess he'd agreed. It was dated three years ago. "Oops" he laughed and went to put on his running gear.

After his run, Michael showered and decided he'd eat then read the digest. He didn't imagine anything in the refrigerator would be too good after all this time and called for pizza. The phone buzzed for a second then reported "pizza not found". Ok, Chinese. He was transferred to the nearest Chinese takeaway. He really wanted some deep fried crispy beef Peking. "No beef, only chicken, no deep fry, only grill" came the response. "Where you been?" He went through what was available. Grilled chicken Peking and plain boiled brown rice was the best they could do for him. He was confused now. The food arrived and was very good, very healthy, and not at all what he'd been thinking of. Maybe he should read the digest and find out what had happened with the food market.

The history of the last five years made terrifying reading. At the end of 2175, just after he went in for his sabbatical, economic crisis had worsened. People spent Christmas and New Year in darkness with little food on the table. Energy companies just could not supply the demand. In March 2176, they adopted the WellCo strategy of imposing harsher penalties on bad payers. Michael's heart hit the roof of his mouth. That was his strategy! By August 2176, the energy companies were getting back on their feet. By the following winter, supplies improved and by the spring, new power plants took up some of the load and prices came down. Michael smiled. He did that. Indirectly, but he did that.

Businesses thrived, new and old, people travelled to shop, food was getting through reliably again. The standard of living shot back up. In June of 2177 the government announced that the plentiful food chain after so much lack had led to a public health crisis. Overeating and excessive indulgence deluged hospitals with self-inflicted health issues that hadn't been seen in more than eighty years. They clamped down on food regulations. So that was where pizza and deep fried had gone. Beef it seemed had to be roasted and all fat cooked out. No more rare steak unless you cooked it yourself, then. Oh, but beef was also rationed to keep everyone within a healthy limit. Damn.

The relief of the economic crisis and to an extent the health crisis had not reduced the crime rate. Those who'd taken to living by ill-gotten gains continued to do so. The government itself looked to harsher penalties. The population continued to increase. Limits on the number of children per household were imposed. More than one and you faced a penalty. Michael didn't want to read about how that was enforced. He read instead about other crime and sentencing. Police had shoot on sight authority for violent crime of any sort. You could be sentenced to death on the spot for getting into a bar fight. Not that Michael had ever done such a thing of course.

By 2078, not paying your taxes on time was a capital offence. Medieval, he thought. He wondered if thought was a crime now. Apparently not, but making thoughts public could be. Oh. Freedom of speech was a thing of the past then. By 2079, companies were licenced to carry out physical penalties for late or missed payments. There was no mention of what they would do. Michael made a mental note to sort out the insurance excess immediately. Theft, he read next, meant right hand removed. Second offence, left hand. Not too bad for left handed thieves who only got caught once, he thought then checked his thoughts again.

Vandalism, he was interested now, vandalism was a mandatory blinding sentence. You didn't have to be able to see to throw stones and spray paint, he thought. Second offence, shoot on sight. He started to laugh at the thought of shooting a blind person on sight then corrected himself. Actually that was pretty harsh. A good kicking was the worst he'd have done to the kid who'd painted his

house red. The list went on and on and he grew more and more afraid to even be reading about it. Writing or even reading what the government considered inflammatory material was another mandatory blinding. Speaking such information in public, tongue cut out. That applied to swearing in public too along with a heavy fine. Shit. He meant oh dear.

So what about 2080? He skipped forward a few pages intending to read the rest later. In the world he'd woken up to, the majority of penalties were now shoot on sight. He told the phone to call the insurance company. A voice recording spoke to him: "We're sorry. Our offices are now closed. Operating hours are Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm. We're sure you didn't mean to call out of hours and you will not be fined for this call." He didn't dare try to call back to see what would happen. He'd call from the office tomorrow, if that was still allowed.

He sat back in the armchair by the window and thought hard about everything he'd just read. It dawned on him that the whole thing hinged on one phrase. Harsher penalties. He'd started this. He'd changed the world then gone to sleep for five years. In his artificial sleep there'd been many dreams but none of this enforced Utopia. What would happen if he didn't say good morning to the first person he saw tomorrow? What if he said it wrong? Would he have his tongue cut out? He'd done this. It was all his fault. He wished he was back in his dingy little office crunching data. Could it really be that bad? He just had to adjust but do it fast. Maybe he could lead the way to a gentler way of dealing with problems. Maybe he'd be killed for dissent as well if he tried.

He didn't sleep at all before driving to work the next day. The flyway was backed up for miles. No-one seemed to mind though. The car had spent a while updating its information files before he left the garage and he noticed new, insanely low speed limits were in place. That accounted for some of the congestion. Suddenly the cars started moving again. He pulled alongside two cars that had ever so slightly collided. There was minor damage to the front bumper of one and the rear of the other. A police officer was on the scene with his gun drawn. Michael heard the words "without due care and attention" then physically jumped as the officer shot one of the drivers right between the eyes. Michael switched to auto-

drive and took his hands off the controls. He felt tears welling in his eyes and he knew, no matter how the car accident had happened, the sentencing, the death, was his fault.

When he arrived at WellCo, the place had changed. Everything was brightly coloured. There were fresh flowers in the entrance lobby on shiny chrome stands. The receptionist beamed at him. "Good morning Mr Wheatley. How was your holiday, sir?"

"Good morning to you too," he squinted at her name badge "Miss Richards. It was wonderful. Things have changed a lot in five years, haven't they?" He forced cheeriness into his voice and suspected it was something he'd have to learn to use as default.

"Oh, yes, but everyone is so much happier now, don't you think?" She raised her hands to adjust the flowers on reception. Her hand. The right one was missing. Michael gaped. She looked at him. "Oh this? I left a pen in my pocket on my way out. Completely forgot about it. Won't do that again!" She was chirping like it was the best thing that had ever happened to her. He swallowed hard.

"I guess not. I have a lot to get used to." He nodded to her and moved off toward the elevator. There was no elevator. He took the stairs. Healthier? But what about disabled access? A realisation dawned on him and he felt sick.

The executive floor smelled of fresh paint. The secretary scuttled forward to greet him. "Good morning Mr Wheatley. Welcome back. Your office is ready and waiting." She grinned plastically at him.

"Good morning, thank you. Which one is it?"

"Oh, let me show you. Be careful of the paint. We had a little blood to cover up, you know."

"Of course." Michael fought to control his tone. "Why don't you just relax and tell me which one's mine and I'll see you very soon?"

"Oh how clever and kind you are. Your room is third on the right down the hall."

"Thank you. I'll buzz if I need anything." She giggled to herself and scuttled back to her desk.

Michael found his office, gold name plate on the door, and walked in. A dozen people in business dress stood up and applauded him. He almost fell back through the door. The boss materialised at his side and placed an arm round his shoulders. "Great to see you Wheatley. Doesn't he look well, everyone?" A cacophony of agreements buzzed through the room. The boss escorted him to his new desk and urged him to be seated. The gathered executives applauded again. A cork popped somewhere near the door.

"Champagne anyone? Non-alcoholic of course – can't be breaking the law even for special occasions." That was one Michael had missed in the guide. He accepted a glass and wondered why the stuff tasted just as awful as it did when it contained alcohol. A toast was raised to Michael and changing the world. He wondered how many of them really thanked him for it.

A buzz of conversation started up. Questions started flying at him. How was his holiday? What was he thinking of introducing now? Did he have any plans this evening? Had he picked up his car yet? He was about to say that actually he really needed to call his insurance company when a knock at the door silenced everyone. A woman in a purple suit with neatly bobbed hair and a fixed grin that didn't reach her eyes opened the door. A police officer walked in together with a big man in a black suit and white shirt. The big man asked "Which one of you is Michael Wheatley?"

"That's me," Michael answered in a small voice. "What can I do for you?" He tried to keep the terror from his voice.

"That's him," said the big man, pointing at Michael, but looking at the police officer.

"Michael Wheatley, I have a warrant here for your execution on grounds of unpaid debt." Everyone gasped. Was it the warrant or the grounds that shocked them? "Do you have anything to say in your defence?"

"I've been away," Michael blurted out in desperation. "I was about to call and pay the outstanding amount when this impromptu party surprised me."

"Away. And how long have you been back?"

"Since yesterday afternoon. I tried to call and the lines were closed."

“We have evidence that after your arrival you went out running and returned at 3.30pm. You had ample time to place the call.”

“But I didn’t know!” Michael shrieked.

“Michael Wheatley I am adding to the charges raising your voice to a police officer. There are witnesses present.”

“But...”

“But nothing Mr Wheatley. You have failed to provide sufficient reason for non-payment and committed a further offence in the presence of others. Your sentence will be carried out immediately. Stand please.”

Michael tried to stand and collapsed back into his brand new chair. The room span. The officer waited for him to regain control. The boss stepped forward with a paypad trying to get the big man’s attention, a look of panic on his face. The big man tapped the officer on the shoulder, and said he’d be willing to take payment now. There was an appeal in his voice. The officer removed his visor and hat. Michael recognised him instantly. He’d grown a bit taller and filled out a lot more, but the eyes were the same. The kid. DIE GRASS. There was no way the kid could have known his name until now, could he? Michael knew there was no way out of this.

“Are you attempting to pervert the course of justice gentlemen?”

“No, not at all” said the big man. The boss looked from the officer to Michael but said nothing. “Surely we can come to some arrangement here?” The big man really didn’t think it through.

“Attempting to bribe a police officer.” The kid officer turned his gun to point at him, aimed low and shot him point blank in the gut. A woman screamed and the big man fell to the floor. “You might live, you might not. Lenient sentence,” said the kid. Someone Michael couldn’t name was pressing his rolled up jacket against the big man’s wound, looking up at the officer with a mixture of hate, fear and anguish. No-one said a word. The officer turned back to Michael who’d felt a sense of calm descend over him. He’d realised none of this would be happening if he hadn’t tried to make a name for himself. He’d put his own interests first and the

world was now paying the price. He deserved this and the appointed officer, well, that just seemed like poetic justice. He stood to face his sentence.

The young officer knew exactly who Michael was. The glint in his eye gave that away plainly. Michael imagined him waiting for the opportunity to come around for this moment. "Sprayed any paint lately?" he said with absolute calm. The kid wavered slightly. "Oh, come on. You eyeballed me outside my house. I saw you running off!" Michael was shouting now. He hoped someone in the room was taking note. At the very least the kid should lose an eye for what he'd done. He realised he was already willing to advocate the sentences he'd felt so bad about just a moment before. No. No, he could never be in favour of this. "Because of you, officer," he spat the word out like a bad taste "I wrote a report about harsher penalties. Because of you I had this excess to pay on my insurance. Because of you, I went away for five years. Because of you, people are executed every day all over the world."

The kid cocked the gun. "Yes, Mr Wheatley, I read the news too. Because of YOU I can do..." the shot rang out. It hit Michael in the chest, piercing the right ventricle of his heart, carrying on through to the wall behind him. "...that." finished the kid. Michael fell back into his chair. He felt the life draining from him already. So quick. Funny how it didn't really hurt. The officer held the boss back from helping him. The irony was too much.

Michael looked around him, taking in the spatter of his own life on the wall now above him where he sat. There was a whooshing in his ears as his body tried to re-pressurise. He knew he should probably try to stem the flow, but what would that achieve? Another five or ten minutes in the mad world he had created?

He noticed a warm soggy feeling and knew it wasn't blood. His own body couldn't even let him die with dignity, emptying his bladder in a desperate effort to spare resources. He couldn't really move anymore so he couldn't find out, but imagined it mingling with the contents of his veins, dripping from the chair onto the scrupulously clean carpet. He thought he could hear it splashing but couldn't be sure anymore. Which poor one-armed bastard would have to clean that up?

Tears formed at last in his eyes as he realised just how many people must have died like this, on the spot executions, maybe hundreds every day and all because of the one bright idea he'd ever had. That he would now never be able to put right. Maybe this really was what he deserved.

With his last breath, Michael threw his head back and laughed.