

Thoughts Over a Cigarette

The last human on Earth is in a large square room. It is high-ceilinged, gray and white and black, and has no windows. It glows with emotionless bulbs radiating from cable-strung light fixtures that would be awfully difficult to dust, clean, and remove bugs from if it were not for meticulous insulation and continuous sanitization that had once been routine. They shine on the room's symmetry, its uniform slab balconies with stainless steel rails and two stainless steel elevators placed directly and precisely across from one another over the second level of the room, both leading to the main floor of what can still be considered the headquarters of the organization that owns this facility. That was thousands of feet above. On the lowest level, where the last human on Earth sits on the gray floor lit by the white light way overhead, he lights his ritual cigarette, one that he has taken the time to learn to roll properly (he has been smoking them inside this room, something that would have been highly frowned upon if he were in any other circumstance other than being the last human on Earth, obviously. In different times, he would have been expected to go to one of the accessible areas of the roof designated to smoking, an action that was highly stigmatized though tolerated). There are plenty of papers and bags of tobacco and thus the last human on Earth is not concerned with running out for a while. He lights it patiently, taking a drag and looking up at the machine in the center of the room. The machine that sits there has some sort of gentle whirring he doesn't care to understand.

Four black square pillars, nearly a meter by a meter in width and 3 meters high each stand almost as emotionless as the lights that illuminate it. Each has a small band of green light around the top. A rather ugly and boring machine, superficially that is, when viewed from the eyes of the last human on Earth's seat on the floor.

The machine probably doesn't care about or even bother to acknowledge the last human on Earth or bother to notice him, assuming it could feel and understand. The last human on Earth always valued the relationships where he and whoever could be in the same room with one another without

feeling any inclination towards performative reassurance of each other's company through pointless and quickly forgotten conversation; he valued the idea that there were parts of the psyche and certain aspects of the soul that was impossible to reveal through deliberate thought and conscious effort. Those were sacred things, he thought, and that's why those things don't just allow themselves to appear through any kind of social manufacturing. That was something that the last human on Earth really appreciated about that machine in the center of the room. The last human on Earth thinks it definitely could make a gesture in such a direction, considering its understanding of the depth of the human condition, though it perhaps decided otherwise in the earliest times of their relationship. It was more concerned with its duties assigned by those who used to inhabit this complex.

The machine is now almost entirely self-sustaining. A system that could move and adapt within the black plates of steel that contained it, very reservedly and deliberately, affording itself the ability to protect its children through what was referred to as a quasi-stasis effect. It was absolutely stunning. It was regarded as not just a marvel in engineering, business prowess, socially conscious and wholly dominating marketing, capital acquisition, effective media strategizing. It was a profoundly beautiful organization of steel, electrical current, precious metals, and whatever the once inhabitants of the headquarters that the machine has been housed in had hidden from those unworthy to understand, regarded by political figures, prominent artists, scholars, drug addicts, battered women, family men, the mentally-ill, nuns, socio-conscious students and the like as something that revealed some sort of truth, some inarguable testament to not only the capacity of man but to the capacity of wonder that the understandable and manipulatable universe had born. It was a derivation of the compassion and desire that man possessed towards understanding that universe in a way that complemented and augmented the beauty of it, an attitude that had indicated a deeper and now more tangible and accessible realization of man's gratefulness for the complexity of life and inevitable death. It was the closest thing to synthesized life man had witnessed, conceived through love and sacred

connection among a team of the most intelligent and respected members of the last human on Earth's former society. Furthermore, It had been rumored by the public at one time (and the last human on Earth will confirm that it was, indeed, true) that the men and women who created it became so deeply connected and inspired by creating this seemingly living, almost assuredly breathing and thinking and loving thing that they immediately abandoned their families upon the completion of the project, requested to allocate a portion of the headquarters to a sort of commune that they would live in almost exclusively, wherein which they attempted to become what was referred to by the suits and ties of the organization as the closest thing to "soul-bonded" as their bodies had allowed, pursuing an alleviation of guilt that each of them possessed for being unable to merge perfectly and entirely with the other members of the newly constructed commune because of the impreciseness of their verbal and physical means to do so had allowed them. When the leading members of the organization sought quiet and discrete consultation on this matter by a well-respected sexual psychologist, she suggested that such behavior in light of their accomplishment appeared to be a reaction to a trauma that could have only been remedied through what appeared to be an attempt at the experience of physical and emotional oneness among the group, a kind of spiritually desperate eros that occurred only *after* their creation of what then appeared then to be *actual life*. This declaration had only further convinced the leading members of the organization that the group's creation was some legitimate transcendental thing, prompting them to reward themselves for their managerial and organizational accomplishment with an all-expenses-paid vacation to Aruba. It was an obelisk of some sort of utter purity that they happily got drunk to for a while.

But now there's only one man, smoking his cigarette, who has little care to risk labeling what stood in front of him rather humbly in some that didn't capture its essence. Hence his reserve towards grabbing pen and paper, or a microphone, and pairing it with an effort to convey his suspicions and instincts and thoughts to something that wasn't human or wasn't that machine. Maybe a God would

have heard him if he spoke, or read what manifested on the page from his provoked mind, offering its sympathy for the last human on Earth's awfully poor handwriting.

And below him a vast complex of arteries that extended from underneath this machine and beyond the headquarters' premises into those sacred grounds where its children had sacrificed their existence on this Earth to be saved by it. Its expansive web of current and information relies on a bifurcating pattern to reach the churches of the new denomination not out of structural necessity but out of reverence, making sure that it would operate as a system of blood vessels of animals. To do otherwise would have been an insult. That decision had been an homage to the motherly protection that it now offered man, and that beautiful force would flow as blood did. To how it offered, so gently and tenderly, to remove them from any earthly tragedy that had been upon them when they would finally give themselves to it. An homage to its removal of man from the concern of hunger and serious pain. To the freedom from feelings of shame and humiliation that once stabbed them. And the desperate and ritualistic longing that could be determined to have no basis in ultimate reality, just self-destructive neurological habit. And it promised that there would be no more confusing and almost indescribable misery that could encapsulate their being, drowning them during their drives on confusing and frustrating roads among people who are equally tortured in some way on those terrible mornings, heading towards the sunrise of the apparent meaning of their lives, the same misery that held their souls the night before. And the veins of this animal, modeled the same way (and painted in a sort of ethereal and life-like blue), that carried back with it from its pristine churches what might not have been the souls but definitely the former suffering of those political figures, prominent artists, scholars, drug addicts, battered women, family men, nuns, mentally-ill, socio-conscious students and the like and cleansed them. At the gentle mercy and unwavering love of this machine they now were, the arms and tools within it slowly moving when deemed necessary, protecting, tending to, repairing, and optimizing the technological infrastructure that was the new home for its children's new existence.

Now finishing his cigarette, the last human on Earth broke the hypnotic gaze that the presence of that machine and its soft humming often drew him into, resurfacing for air. He thought about those last few men who were here with him days before. How they didn't know how the machine in the center of this room even worked, just like he didn't. All that had made sense to them is that once so many others were gone and floating in that haze somewhere did they realize what truly owning someone meant until then. Not just to have them in chains or in a cell, but to be responsible for every fiber of them minus their lifeless bodies that had been buried in unflattering mass graves. That was just about the cruelest joke that the machine could play on them, too. That's never how those last men would have ever put it to words, of course, but that's how the machine forced them to. In all of its wonder, it completely trapped men and gave them to those still alive. They then had the ability to destroy or judge those trapped men. To cut the flow of electricity from those ugly wires somewhere underground, removing them. That machine, a creation rooted in some form of control, whether it was related to money or something deeper, held them responsible by really showing them what it means to be given the lives that they had so desperately wanted to influence and dominate in some way with nothing in between.

The End