

Cogito Burrito Infinito

From the hallway Brone leaned hard into the sticky kitchen doorframe with his forehead. His bathrobe gaped and hung, a dirty terrycloth lean-to held aloft by bony tentpoles and greasy guy guts. His bedhead was so severe, one was inclined to imagine he'd either slept in a hammock or a pile of bean bags or a large moving hamster ball. He was angled out here, a glum, lanky hypotenuse, while today's first round of frozen burritos turned in the microwave. He stared straight down at the perpetual and sandy-beige carpet with dark eyes that appeared to have absorbed all the pigment from his skin.

-The date is 08/08/08. Yeah! I'm not feelin' great, in a chronic depressed state, under a ship-sinkin' weight.

Whoa-oh! These black feelings inundate, but I gotta keep it straight, or Davy Jones' locker will be my fate.-

His one bathrobe pocket held enough sleeping pills to end a whale—or a thirty-three-year-old man. The other pocket held his heavily creased list of “Possible Actions.” With resolve he pulled the sheet out, each “Action” designed to combat this great uselessness.

Galen had helped him put the list together. *Doctor* Galen, who never wore socks and who smelled like a goat fight and who thought he was cool for letting Brone use his first name in sessions, even though he still wanted him to put the Doctor part on the front. Idiot.

First on the list: “Could you possibly eat a healthy meal?” Yes. He was doing that and that was plenty for now. The burritos would be done soon. He just had to wait in the hall.

There was no entering the apartment's kitchen unless absolutely necessary as it

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possessed a violent and eggy murder-stink from the dish stacks filling the sink and the surrounding counters. Every single one of his plates, bowls, plastic containers, the lids for said plastic containers, a serving tray, all of his pans, the aluminum colander, and a repurposed clipboard were crusted in crimson from his tabasco and mayonnaise burrito-dipping concoction. Towering stacks of white plates and bowls like the ripped-out vertebrae of enormous, ocean otters had spicy blood smears and furry tufts of mold.

The dish situation dire, he had, since early July, been eating out of the glow-in-the-dark *Frisbee* dangling from his hand and then rinsing it off in the bathroom sink, which was totally fine. The grim dish mound would get dealt with on a day he was up to it, maybe tomorrow, and that was also totally fine. Unfortunately today, which was either a Wednesday or a Thursday, felt like a three at best.

Leaning still, he closed his eyes. He could do this day. One thing at a time. Keep a playful attitude. Please don't let it be the last.

-Ooooo, yeah, waitin' for the oven's ringer—whoa-oh, girl, I linger for the ringer—and she said, 'Can my finger linger on your dinger?'

So dumb. *Your dinger*. Something smile-like surfaced on the pale, beyond stubbled but not bearded face of Brone Droste. He opened his dark eyes and stood straight, pulling his now corrugated brow back from the unknown stickiness.

The microwave's sonar ping sounded as he perched at the edge of the kitchen. Ready, his sunken chest took a last deep lungful before plunging to the refrigerator where he fished out three *Miracle Whip* packets and three *Fire Sauce* packets from institutional boxes. Banking to one side, his *Phillies' Phanatic* slippers coasted past the marooned dishes, as he reeled in the main course and sailed out of the room.

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He came up for air in the hallway, mildly self-congratulatory and trailing a wake of steamy chicken, cheese, and beans. Sitting down at the grimy Formica dining table, he opened a warm diet root beer from the cases stacked on top. His skinny fingers shuffled the condiments into a stack, alternating each red and blue packet. Pinching them together at one end and giving a few shakes, he used a single scissor stroke to open them. As the colored rectangle ends drifted to join thousands of their red and blue brethren on the floor below, it looked as though two-thirds of a primary-colored magical creature trio had clipped their fingernails here for years. Perhaps irritable Mr. Red and droopy Mr. Blue came by regularly to get rid of DNA evidence after pummeling sunny Mr. Yellow.

-Snip-clip, hello! Clip-snip, hello, hello! We haven't seen that mellow fellow! We did not hear him yell or bellow! We did not beat him with a cello or bash his organs into Jell-o!-

Brone squeezed the handful of packets lengthwise down each burrito, leaving red and white stripes, memorial flags over tortilla coffins cradled in the luminous *Frisbee*.

* * *

In the living room where the sun fought and lost to the window's nailed-up blanket, Brone sat on his fake-velvet couch in a worn crescent depression that overlapped others like a chain of distended Venn diagrams. Facing the television, the couch was a monolithic furnishing in watered-down pea-soup green that some maniac had designed to class up a bomb shelter or a Turkish military base or the VIP tent at an Amish Burlap Festival. Uncomfortably hard and much too deep, one either needed to sit forward, feet on the beige, with no support behind, or to sit all the way back with the lip of the couch

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hitting mid-calf as though one were a child.

He was engrossed in a *World's Strongest Man* competition where a Norwegian man named Magnus Ubrukelighet readied himself to heave a truncated telephone pole further than current competition leader, Blażej. The camera panned to show Magnus' wife who appeared very anxious, an expression Brone assumed had been on her face since the day her husband announced he would be focusing his life and their finances on lug-ging tractor tires through a slalom course.

-“And how are dear Magnus’ sales at ‘Honest Anne’s Sedans and Minivans’?”

“Well, Mother—slight change of plans...”-

Brone wished he could somehow buoy her spirits as she scrambled endless heaps of egg whites to shovel into Magnus.

But, unfathomably pointless and stupid as it was, at least those neckless bastards were doing something with their lives, while he, Brone Droste, was not. This, he reminded himself, was totally fine for right now. He was trying.

He picked the next “Possible Action” at random. “Could you possibly change your bed sheets?” Fresh, clean sheets would in fact make him feel better. Unfortunately the other sheets were dirty too, which meant laundry, which meant trips up and down the stairs to the basement where he could very well run into the blonde-haired girl from #33 who smelled of mangos. He was not ready for that. Also, he suspected his detergent was causing some sort of dermatitis on his forearms, and he wanted to switch to something hypoallergenic.

-Forgive this maunder, as I wander, should I launder, it’s a quandr—y-

Alright, so no to changing sheets, for now, which was fine, no rush. He could defi-

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nately see himself handling this tomorrow. Just get up earlier, be brave, take the bus to *ALDI* for hippie detergent and several cases of burritos. Yes. Boom. This is exactly how bankers get shit done. Barely started and he already had a plan for Thursday—or Friday. Whichever.

Next, “Could you possibly normalize your sleep pattern?” which meant getting a normal amount of sleep during normal sleeping times. This one actually belonged on more of a “Fantasy Action” list. Ever since he was young, sleep hours had ranged from zero to the entire day with the steadiness of a rowboat in a hurricane. However, he *was* getting up earlier tomorrow which counted as progress. Boom. He shifted on the rigid couch to catch the light better.

“Could you possibly have sex with someone?” (“Someone other than yourself,” Dr. Galen had quipped from his smug fart-sodden throne.) Also more of a “Fantasy Action” list item, at least for now, which was completely, totally fine.

“Could you possibly take your psych meds regularly?” Uh-uh. They made him numb and floaty and sometimes much worse.

“Could you possibly wash your dishes?” No fucking way. But—maybe he could just put on mittens and toss them out in *Hefty* bags. Then he could just stick with the *Frisbee* system, which was in fact working flawlessly. He could do this later, maybe after dinner. Hell yes. Duck down because the Boom is *swingin’* and Captain Problem Solver is on *deck*. He could feel the black thoughts recede, and he stowed the sleeping pills’ deep-blue bottles underneath his couch.

“Could you possibly do some exercise?” Alright, now that was an interesting one. Get some endorphins flowing. Nature’s lil’ mood boosters. He cracked his knuckles. He’d be

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squat-thrusting iron anchors with Magnus in no time.

On the clippings-covered floor, he cleared away the blues and reds. Pushup time. He did a handful of pushups before his narrow arms washed out and he had to quit. When he sat down, his shoulder hurt. Maybe it was a good hurt.

He took a deep inhale. Christ in a canoe, he was crushing this. If he wasn't careful, he was gonna complete this act-your-way-into-feeling-better list way too fast.

Brone looked back to the television where someone in a kilt was lifting a *Yamaha* outboard motor over their head. He felt his skinny bicep. All in good time, people.

He clicked to the *Home Shopping Network*. His favorite host, poor Alice Miseen-Abyrne, was demonstrating a no-kink garden hose with faux wonderment and expressive, presentational hand gestures that sickened him. He was certain they sickened Alice too. He could see flashes of desperation in her smile on the live broadcast, but there was nothing he could do.

Calling the network yesterday, he had gotten through the phone gauntlet far enough to say, on-air, before the line had gone dead, that he knew all about her pain. Alice had laughed it off as a crank call, because she had to, but he thought her eyes throbbed into the camera, just for an instant, to say, 'Thank you for understanding.' He had done all he could.

Now Alice was speaking with a call-in viewer about the alleged artistry of a soulless, mass-produced hunk of brass in the shape of a heart that could not have been more disgusting and banal if it had been dog shit in the shape of a pile. Brone imagined her at home, night after night, passed out in beautiful pink wine vomit, amidst enough boxes of *Franzia* rosé to build a small fort or furnish a fancy New Jersey wedding, but the de-

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bauchery could never extinguish her shame as shopping shepherd of the damned.

-In this land I wonder Alice, inside your callous palace, drinking from a golden chalice, will you fly free like Dae-dal-us, or cliffside dash yourself upon the talus?-

Sitting on the other side of a defeated and forlorn bowl of potpourri, Dr. Galen had always insisted, “You must put on your *own* life jacket before helping anyone *else*.”

Today he was doing it. Just make it to bedtime. He pulled out the list.

“Could you possibly clean your place?” He looked around. It was almost fine—mostly.

“Could you possibly go outside for a walk?” With all the things he had already accomplished, he bet he probably could. Some sun, some air, just a little spin around the block, nothing major. In the bedroom he found a bright sweatshirt that featured a cheeseburger wearing a pair of sunglasses. It had been in the dirty clothes pile long enough to be clean again. His pajama pants were fine. Donning a pair of *Chucks*, he was good to go.

He walked into the complex’s courtyard and stood, pale hands on narrow hips, marveling at the grass. Someone had just cut it. Also there were nice, crisp corners on the hedges. His rent, via his affluent but distant mother, had partially paid for this landscaping, and he was pleased to find the grounds were being maintained.

A bearded man with a lunch box passed on the sidewalk. Brone managed a thin wave and smile. He received a wary glance in return. He looked down at his outfit, which appeared fine. Oh. Of course. His hair. He should have put on a baseball hat. Whatever, that was fine. Some people were in the know about hip, disheveled hairstyles, and some were not. Ol’ Beardy McLunchbox would feel like a dick once he saw a few

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messy-haired celebrities.

He walked the length of a short, brick building and stopped at the street corner. A small older lady in an aquamarine track suit with shiny gold piping was walking her Pomeranian. He bent in half to pet him.

“What’s his name?”

“Caesar B. Augustus.”

“Oh, wow, you have three names, buddy. Impressive.”

“Cheeseburgers don’t wear sunglasses,” she said.

“No.” He gave a little laugh. “They sure don’t. You got me.”

Holy shit. He was outside on a walk and he was having a conversation with a stranger.

“This neighborhood is changing. I hate it,” she said.

“Oh—uh-huh,” which was the last thing Brone said for a long time.

She told him, in full, about all the changes bothering her, including the mid-week trash pickup by the “sanitation morons,” and then continued, without respite, to give her opinion on several things in the news which she also didn’t like. His face began a slow slide into a baffled, vinegar grimace. She went on for quite a bit about “this terrible Philly weather,” which had never been balmy, and then complained about how Caesar B. Augustus didn’t appreciate her and refused to wear his glitter-spangle suit. She then explained that she “doesn’t pick up his poopies because they’re so tiny they just go right into the earth.” Brone wished *she* would go right into the earth.

At this point, a heavy lady with cat-in-a-birthday-hat earrings and a utility cart passed on the sidewalk and smiled without intervening in any way. Maybe she went to

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get help?

Then, without any aggression or hostile provocation on Brone's part, Caesar's mother laid into him about her husband Larry's sciatica and how bad the inflammation was at the L5- S1 juncture and how it made him grumpy and not want to talk to her, which made Brone think *he* might have sciatica, and how, as a last resort before back surgery, she was making Larry try some kinda something-wort, an herb you could only get from Canada due to the goddamn FDA because, so far, ice didn't work and *Meloxicam* had done nothing but puff out his glands, and they had tried physical therapy, but Larry wouldn't do his exercises because he said he wasn't some bendy yoga lady, and a cortisone injection, from a "Hispanic" doctor with a mustache, actually *had* worked, but only for a month, so it was all up to this illicit pain herb.

And then, after this relentless, vicious attempt to break his spirit, she grilled him, like the almighty Gestapo, and asked, "So—what do you do for a living?"

He made eye contact and said, "Ma'am, I work for the FDA."

* * *

He watched his closet mirror, the bathroom mirror directly behind, as several thousand reflected Brones took off bright cheeseburger sweatshirts and hurled them under unmade beds.

Now cinched up in his dirty robe, he looked out the peephole and double-checked that the front door was bolted against that blathering aqua monster. Fuck walks. Fully-conscious kidney theft in a *Motel Thrift-Tee* bathtub would be more pleasant. He lay back and tried to collect himself on his rigid, bile-colored couch.

Every movement now an effort, he pulled out the list again. "Could you possibly call

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someone and let them know how you're feeling?" This one was last for a reason. He hated to drag anyone else down, and there was never anything to say that would help anyway.

-“Hi. Once again I’m being suffocated with the cellular awareness that life is a painful sucking void which obviates any endeavor whatsoever, and I’m surrounded by imbeciles who like to whistle and ride jet-skis.”

“Well—sure, I mean, nobody likes a whistler. How about taking some old magazines and making a Vision Board? Or going for a nice walk?”-

He didn't call the helpful friends anymore. And the fellow gloomsters he could almost hear shrug their shoulders before giving some variation of, “I know, but what can you do?”

He dropped the list next to the couch and covered his tearing eyes with a skinny hand. Dear fuck was that really it and was that the whole list? He had done what exactly? Deluded himself he was going to get up early and do a million things for clean bedsheets? Suffered a verbal waterboarding from a ruthless brute in shiny sateen? Decided to discard every kitchen item he owned and eat from a glowing disc for the rest of his life? Congratulations, go-getter.

Still on his back, he threw his arms up and behind his head, which made his shoulder twinge. Oh right, and he'd likely mangled his rotator cuff doing hardly any pushups. Probably gonna need that Canadian whatever-wort, and he couldn't even remember its name.

Looking down his rumpled landscape, the identical furry green *Phanatic* slippers were miles away, but he could see their flat black eyes watching him. Again. Why both-

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er? None of it matters anyway. In a few decades, no one will even remember you were here. Let's just go.

But such a boring, predictable reaction. And the whole process was so awfully ordinary and average at this point. Sure, the first person to kill themselves could be respected as an innovator. They probably blew everyone's minds for months.

"Did you hear the crazy shit the guy in Cave 86 did?"

"86? The cave with all the lichen on the front?"

"Yeah, all the lichen on the front. Cave 86."

"Wait. You don't mean Mr. Primo from Cave 86?"

"Yes, Dwayne. Mr. Primo from Cave 86 with all the lichen."

"I like that guy. Always says Hi."

"Yeah, well this morning he jumped into the volcano and killed himself."

"He what?! You can do that?!"

After that though, nothing but copycats with slight variations. Boringsville.

For his own departure, he considered wearing an extravagant rented clown costume to a SEPTA train platform some hard, rainy Tuesday morning when it was full of trench-coated commuters and, while his boom box cranked out some upbeat disco song, probably "Soul Finger," he would hand out lollipops to the people waiting to go to work. At the point when most people were at least smiling, if not grooving a bit and eating their lollipops, he would get everyone's attention, look at them with his huge, candy-red grin, and at the exact right moment, he would jump backwards off the platform to explosively splatter-merge with the racing windshield of the Norristown High Speed Line.

It was a magnificent plan, but the clown costume rental process was overwhelming.

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He contorted himself to grasp underneath the couch and pull out the three, deep-blue bottles of sleeping pills. He lined them up down his sunken chest and stomach. From this perspective, with their wide white lids, they descended in size like nesting dolls in the shape of sailors.

They wordlessly promised him nothing. An absolute and effortless nothing. The gentlest, permanent descent from this exhausting cluster fuck.

He observed as they slowly rose and fell with his breath for minutes, maybe days.

He would call someone first, just to technically finish the list, and he would keep it upbeat. And then, after the call, mundane and typical and pathetic or not, he would hang up.

He reached for his phone in between the barely olive couch cushions. The seam between them was the softest part. He kept the phone there so he could feel the vibration when someone called, knowing someone cared, without having to see their name and feel pressured to pick up, which, while not ideal, was totally fine.

He scrolled to stop on Kung Fu Arthur.

Kung Fu Arthur had ceased being Art or Farty Arty when a crewcut 8th grader smoking by the bleachers had called him a filthy jungle-bunny. While Brone panicked because there were three of them, Kung Fu Arthur had walked up to the larger kid and, with no martial-arts training whatsoever, used the side of his hand, fingers extended, to karate-chop the kid's collar bone, breaking it in half, which crumpled the kid to the ground where he screamed like he was being eaten alive by a tiger that was on fire.

Up and down rode the torso sailors.

In middle school, Art had walked in on Brone making small cuts on his thighs. Art

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never told on him. Art also never let him go.

-Please be there-

It rang loud then went silent several times, a distressed signal. There was a click.

“Brone, my man!”

He nearly dropped the phone. “Oh—hey, Kung Fu Arthur. How’s it going?”

“It’s goin’. Hey, called you a few times.”

“Yeah. I’ve been busy.” His dark eyes watched the pills.

“Uh-huh. Busy,” said Kung Fu Arthur. “Well listen, you wanna go to the batting cages tonight?”

“No. Can’t. Hurt my shoulder working out.”

“Workin’ out, huh? Hey, good! You still eatin’ those burritos though?”

“Nature’s perfect food. Meat, vegetable, dairy, grain.”

“You gotta eat some fruit too.”

“I hate fruit.” Brone remembered. “Except mangos.”

“Come over tomorrow to watch the *Phillies*. Loretta will grab you some.”

“They don’t play until Sunday.”

“Today’s Saturday, man.”

“—Oh, right, right,” said Brone.

“—Look, I’ll come pick you up tomorrow at eleven. I’m gonna be by your way anyhow.”

“I’ll have to see.” He stared at the bottles.

“Uh-huh. Well, check your busy schedule.” Kung Fu Arthur pulled away. “What? Oh, yeah. Loretta wants to know what you been doing with PNC? The bank? We got some

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letters.”

“Why does she think I did something? I didn’t do anything. She’s always hated me.”

Kung Fu Arthur laughed.

Brone said, “What do the letters say? Any like legal stuff?”

“No, something about thank you for the ideas, but PNC is happy with their current advertising campaign.”

“Oh. Well, I may have mailed them a few ideas for a new spokes-mascot.”

“You *may* have? And what, you put *my* return address?”

“I thought the employees opening boring bank mail all day could use a break and I thought you could use an esteem boost. Also, there’ll probably be some sort of award and I don’t care for the limelight.”

“Uh-huh. An award. Well, what are the mascot ideas I sent so I can get an acceptance speech prepared?”

“The last one was for a talking zucchini named Fredo.”

“...”

“Their talking checkbook mascot, Checky or whatever, lacks imagination and surprise.”

“Man, I don’t *want* my bank to have imagination and surprise.”

“Sure you do. ‘Hey! Come-a bank with me! I’m-a you friend, Fredo the zucchini!’”

Brone said, “I also sent a bunch of action illustrations.”

“Uh-huh.”

“See, Fredo’s a banker, but his *real* passion is speedboats. Fairly common among members of the squash fam—”

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“Wait, is this one of your Business Reply Envelope projects?”

“Yeah.”

“You still doing the one where you mail in pieces of roofing shingles to Citibank Credit Services?”

“Yeah. The envelopes are so heavy and they have to pay for the postage.”

“I like that one.”

“Me too.”

“Well, hey, me and Loretta really wanna see what you write if you send any more.”

“If I ever send any more, I will.” Up went the swabbies and then down.

“Alright. Tomorrow, eleven, *Phillies*.”

“I’ll have to see.”

“Uh-huh. I know—Hey, Brone.”

“Yeah?”

“I love you. You ever get really busy, I don’t care what time it is, I want you to call me.”

“—OK, Art.”

And then he hung up.