

# **If This is the Future...Then I'd Rather Flip Burgers**

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## Foreward

I never intended on writing a prequel. And if you'd asked me a week ago, I would have said that there's not a chance of it. But then a story formed. And at first I didn't see the connection. But as I ran through it in my head, it made perfect sense. I had a prequel to "Bots", my 2012 science-fiction/comedy novella.

Enjoy the ride.

Chapter 1 - Looks Like a Prequel

If you ask me why I took the job I honestly couldn't give you any good reason. Could have been a bunch of combined reasons maybe, none of which alone was any better than the others. Or it could have been a vibe, like maybe a subconscious hint poking my side. Destiny's bad joke nudging me towards the mundane solely for its own amusement.

All I know is if I hadn't taken it I'd probably be the assistant manager at a fast-food chain restaurant. Wrangling a crew of pimple-faced teenagers who'd rather be playing on the internet than handing you your fries in a greasy brown bag. And me, on the fast track to a simultaneous stroke and heart attack before year's end.

But then "Maintenance Technician" did have a nice ring to it. Besides, it seemed like that was the best offer this "middle-aged Bachelor's in Psychology" could get. So I went for it and almost didn't get it.

You'd think the hiring process for this position would be pretty straightforward. After all, I'm not applying for "Rocket Scientist". However, since this was a government job it became a monumental production.

I spent days mired in stacks paperwork and interviews with suits that had no names. That was followed by several background checks and even a psych eval by a trio of resident shrinks. The cherry on top was a complete physical including a ceremonial digital prostate check.

This was followed by even more paperwork and then, finally, orientation.

I was hired. They gave me the standard wire-bound 750 page rulebook which I had to memorize along with an access card and then a tour of the facility. The place where I'd end up spending the next eight years.

You're probably wondering why I was there all that time. I mean, I haven't led you to believe in any way that there was anything exciting or inspirational there. Not that I had many (if any) other options. I get it, on its

face it was basically eight years of boredom with a side of stale lukewarm coffee, a tinge of dust, and the vomit green-biased florescent lighting that would drive many a greater person to jump from the nearest high-rise.

However, there was more meat on the bone. So much meat that I quickly accepted my long hours and low pay even to the point of often working overtime. Because, like most people, if there's a train wreck coming, I want to see it.

## Chapter 2 - It's Where I Work

Picture if you will, every nondescript corporate office conglomerate in "Everywhere USA". Eight stories of reflective-window blandness with the kind of landscaping that screams "Corporate Mediocrity". It was mostly "tree, hedge, shrubs, hedge, tree" with an occasional "taller tree" thrown in just to make it look even more like every other corporate office complex you've ever seen.

Now you understand why I had the strongest urge to just turn around and haul ass to the nearest drive-thru. But like most people, there are times in our lives when we don't listen to our gut. But then If I had gone the other way, you wouldn't be here. Because I know for damn sure you wouldn't want to hear the story of how some stupid kid spit in your burger and how I dropped dead in front of the grill at the ripe-young age of 55.

Security was tight as you'd expect at a governmental facility. I can't go into specifics, so just picture metal detectors, pat downs, and lots of questions asked by large people in blue uniforms with guns. Kind of like that. Then there was the elevator down. That's right, underground.

I called them "the Fishbowls" but in reality each was a separate lab with technicians working on different projects that all seemed somewhat related

but purposefully disconnected, Eight fishbowls connected by hallways with restrooms, a small galley kitchen, two conference rooms and elevators leading to other floors.

I thought my job was to fix things being that I was a “Maintenance Technician” but I was much more like a glorified janitor. In fact, in my eight years there, I don’t remember actually fixing anything. But I did have a security clearance. Nothing special, but one level higher than the real janitor who I’ll call “Bob”.

Bob was a nice man, and like everyone else there he kept to himself. Short, greying and portly round with not much of a personality. But then they really didn’t want us to interact with the other employees so I’m just guessing at his “lack of personality”. Give him credit though because the shitter was always immaculate.

In my down time, which was frequent, I’d make up mental stories about Bob. You know, just to keep from being bored. His wife Claire was a chain smoker with a loving heart. She dyed her hair red and kept a style that made her look ten years older than she really was. She adored Bob, but with his job and the kids, she’d grown distant over time and focused more on knitting....

There’d be the disagreement over vacations, the neighbor’s dog shitting in their yard, kids’ grades, high electric bill...the usual stuff. Bob would tell me all about it. But not really. Remember, what I really knew about Bob was that he was a good employee who kept to himself.

As for the others, it was a combination of white lab coats mixed in with military uniforms. Officers mostly but a few Sergeant stripes appeared from time to time. Again, it was stressed that we didn’t interact so other than a nod and a non-echoed “hi” it was like watching fish in a bowl.

One thing that I did learn is that I have a thing for women in white lab coats. It was “fantasy sexy” I guess because you didn’t know what they were wearing under those coats. And they’d always have their hair pulled back. At first that was a turnoff, but it quickly grew on me. Fantasy, however, is where it would stay because I can’t stress to you enough how the bosses

above frowned on employee interactions. It was all business. Sterile, professional business.

Like I said earlier, each Fishbowl was a separate lab in which they were working on specific things. One Fishbowl was all computers. Big ones like I'd never seen before. And it was set up as a "clean room" or as clean as they could get. Just white coats frantically typing on keyboards and looking at screens. Coders, I guess.

Other Fishbowls looked like robotics research. It was strange as some of the things they were working on resembled human limbs. Others were much larger and more machine like. The techs here were pretty much an even mix of white coats and mid-grade officers.

There were also "optics" and "sonar" Fishbowls for lack of a better description. People in these were mostly white coats with just an occasional military visitor.

Though all different, I'd have to say the one commonality shared by all the "bowls" was that of being bland. I didn't see anything personal anywhere, not even in the galley. No family pictures. No "corporate motivational" posters. No fake house plants. Hell, not even a custom coffee mug. Come to think of it, even the bathroom was corporate generic. Immaculate, but generic.

### Chapter 3 - Time Flies When You're Not Having Fun

I've got to say that it's hard seeing the same people every day and being disconnected from them. I wanted to know them and they to each other (probably), but it was policy. I did, however, get to interact with my boss.

Maintenance Supervisor Richard Hayes, though he told me to call him “Dick” and I’m not even sure if that was his real name. After all this is a government facility.

“Carl, you’ve been doing a great job. Everyone’s happy with you.” Dick was giving me my one month evaluation. His 5th floor office was a special kind of “Corporate Sterile”. Fake plant, “wife and two kids” family pictures. Plus several individual family members pictures. You know, Dick and his wife on their honeymoon. First baby. Second baby. Kids at the beach. Soccer pictures. Diplomas. Pretty straightforward stuff. And to tell you the truth, a welcome sight compared to down in the Fishbowls.

My mind had briefly gone into space actually, as Dick was continuing with my evaluation, “...and we are ahead of schedule for the time being. Though I’ve been looking at the files for the upcoming quarter and we may have to ramp things up. And that means overtime. You good with that?”

“Sure. That’s great.”

“OK Carl, I’ve got a lot in front of me if you don’t mind. And can you shut the door on your way out, thanks.”

Well that was about the shortest eval I’ve ever had. Much like everything else around here. Quick and to the point with a side of bland.

So you’re probably asking yourself again, why would I stay here. Well, after a few weeks, I got into the routine of things. I became more of an observer and less of a worker. And I saw things. OK, not so much things as it was more a rhythm or a system. Like I was getting a glimpse into something deeper and it intrigued me.

To look at it only on the surface, it was a ‘brain-splattering, end your life asap’ boring. Or, ‘how the fuck have I ended up here’ prison. But then you take a step back.

There was more. There was a purpose in the sounds. There was a strategy in the air. Hell, even in the ambient temperature, kept at 68 degrees always. No more. No less.

The faces in the white coats and uniforms. They had the occasional gleam of accomplishment. And I began to see that more frequently.

I even caught myself emotionally feeding off of it. Like I was part of “the team”. Even though my participation was mostly emptying trash cans and sweeping floors. But you can learn a lot while doing those things. And I learned a lot.

## Chapter 4 - Home, Sweet Home

6:30am Saturday, my day off. You’d probably say that you’ve been in nicer apartments and I’m sure you have. The giveaways, a pile of dirty clothes, old pizza boxes, leftover Chinese takeout, a large buzzing fly, dishes in the sink, the stale scent of yesteryear.

Where most people my age are married, have kids, live in a two-story on a peaceful lake surrounded by shady oaks, I’m in a studio apartment. It’s really not much. Even 20 years ago, it wasn’t much. But the rent’s cheap and the landlord doesn’t hassle me if I’m a few days late.

I should be asleep, but I can’t. My mind is working on a puzzle. First is the people, my co-workers. Like I did with Bob, I’ve come up with “mental stories” about some of them. Nothing really specific, just stuff to make them more human. I gave them families, hobbies, pets, car payments, in-laws, aches and pains, the usual. It adds some life to the experience.

But what I’m really working on is trying to figure out what they are working on. I can tell it’s serious. I mean, why would the government go through all that trouble and spend all that money if they weren’t working on something big? Maybe part of a mission to Mars? I just hope that it’s not a bio-weapon

or something.

It's amazing what the human brain is capable of. Just laying in my bed, I'd come up with a dozen or more things that could be a product of the Fishbowls. Some sinister. Some benign. Some bizarre. Mostly bizarre.

I spent the rest of my weekend doing what I do best: drinking cheap whiskey and watching television. A man's got to have a purpose.

## Chapter 5 - I Really Need to Get Out More

Weeks pass quickly in the Fishbowls. There's a growing tension that I can't quite describe. Maybe I'm becoming a little institutionalized down here. I do know that my mind is constantly wandering. Well, considering that I really still don't do much at all down here I guess it's understandable.

Fortunately, today's monotony was interrupted by the crash of a coffee mug. I made my way to the galley to see a white coat and an Army Major having what looked like a disagreement. I'm not sure if the mug was dropped or thrown. Both men looked at me and gave me a simultaneous "sorry" and made their way out of the room.

At least I now had something to do as I made a quick cleanup of the shattered white mug and its spilled contents. I've got to admit that I felt a bit of a rush as "sorry" was about the most intense conversation that I've had down here. I swept the floors with a new sense of hope. Pathetic, but somebody's got to do it.

After work I made my usual pit stop at the local Stop 'n Rob. This was a daily event and Ali and I had become good friends. He owned the place and seemed genuinely happy to see me and the other regulars. Also, he had a great selection of cold beer.



Years ago, Ali and his wife made their way to the States from Iraq, or was it Syria. Whatever. He started from the bottom, worked hard, and now owned this business. Gas, beer, beef jerky, iced cream, cold drinks, candy, lottery and the mandatory ATM. Your usual Stop 'n Rob.

Ali's beaming smile was the perfect daily jolt back to reality as it was a complete contrast to my time in the Fishbowls. Here I got a rundown of the daily events which always included baby stories. Ali and his wife had three kids, the youngest of which just started walking. And anything you wanted to know, from politics to philosophy, from game shows to movies, Ali had the answers and was a great conversationalist.

Though he did have the habit of leading everything he said with "No, my friend." followed by whatever it is that was on his mind. For instance there was this one time where I was getting some cough medicine. Just a common cold. No big deal. I didn't even think he saw me. I mean, there must have been six or so other people in there shopping. I had just picked up the red bottle.

"No my friend. You want the green. Trust me."

I looked up, red bottle still in my hand to see Ali's trademark beaming smile. I bought the green. And damn if he wasn't right. My cough was gone. Ali was great for stuff like that.

## Chapter 6 - Two Fish, Four Fish

Remember how I said that time passed quickly in the Fishbowls? Well I did, and it does. Weeks blend into months which blend into years. Down here, you'd have a hard time judging. Upstairs, Ali's kids were now in middle

school. The oldest one was working weekends in the store. Me, I'm still pushing brooms and emptying trashcans.

Bob still kept the shitters immaculate. Dick was still my boss. The white coats and military uniforms still did whatever it was that they did. And I couldn't give you any specifics as to what that actually was. Not that I'd have to kill you or anything. Just that, after all this time, I still didn't know.

One thing that had changed down here, and it was hardly noticeable at first, was that there were a few more fish in the Fishbowls. One week there's six in a bowl. Then seven. Then eight. So benign was the process that I didn't even catch on until the numbers had just about doubled. And no, they weren't replicating. I had already crossed that off my list. This was simply a slow but deliberate buildup of personnel.

They had to be closing in on something. They absolutely had to. Or else this boredom was going to kill me. The persistent day to day monotony was rotting me from the inside. When I thought of what I could have been doing all this time, it depressed me. So, of course, I'd stop myself from thinking. And, I guess, maybe my mental state was starting to show.

Since employee interaction was prohibited, especially with 'non essential' employees like myself, my future down here looked grim. I was balancing on a burning drive to find out what was going on versus falling into the abyss of depressive boredom. And the abyss was beginning to win.

It probably would have too, but for the white board by Fishbowl 3.

OK, we did have an "anti-employee" interaction policy or whatever they called it but I'm sure the others could see that I was struggling. They didn't talk to me or ask me questions. But they did have eyes and could obviously see. I'd catch the occasional glance, that's about it.

Then one morning someone had placed a white board on the glass by Fishbowl 3. On the board scribbled in blue marker was some kind of formula. Looked like a combination of Chinese, Egyptian Hieroglyphics and Western numerals. Most of the board was covered with this scribble except for a blank area on the bottom-right of the board. Three markers lay across

the shelf running the bottom of the board: red, blue and green.

Though curious of the meaning of whatever this was, I could tell that it was way above my pay grade. And whenever I'd pass by and scan the white board, I'd get the immediate attention of the residents of Fishbowl 3. They'd stop what they were doing and watch me trying to decipher this mess.

I've got to tell you that it was a bit embarrassing. OK, a lot. Kind of like the joke was on me. But at least it broke up the "boring" a little.

After a week or so I was getting frustrated. The board set there untouched. The routine the same. They watched me as I scanned the board. Fuck it! My inner 'passive-aggressive' took over.

Without even thinking of the possible consequences, I picked up the red marker and in the bottom-right blank space I wrote a large number "2". Then smiled right at the members of the Fishbowl and set the red marker back down. One white coat, a dark-haired, pretty, thirty-something broke a tiny smile at me. That fissure of emotion spoke volumes, or at least to me it did.

It said basically, "In another place and at a different time, we'd be something great together." OK, it didn't say that. It was more than just a simple acknowledgement and I desperately needed that. It was the nudge that would keep me hanging in there just long enough.

## Chapter 7 - My Week Off

In all these years, Dick's office hadn't changed much. Same fake plant. Same diplomas. Family pictures also the same, but with a few more "older versions of the same family members" added. Office 503, next to the best corner office. Yes he had a window, but this office spoke "Pinnacle of Middle Management for the Rest of My Pathetic Career" all over it.

Dick had put on a few pounds and lost a few hairs but other than that, he was a carbon copy of when I first met him.

“Carl, I’m giving you next week off. We’ve got some renovations set beginning Saturday and will be shut down from then through the following week. Nobody comes in. You’ll still get paid so don’t worry.”

What am I supposed to say here? “Sure Dick, thanks.” Now I didn’t really want a week off. In fact, I don’t think I’d ever taken a day off since I’d been here.

Dick scanned my file, “Looks like you’ve never even taken a day off or had a sick day. Well this’ll do you some good then. Why don’t you go to the beach or something. Either way, we’re closed.”

After my mandatory visit to Ali’s for beer and an intermediate stop at the liquor store for some discount whiskey, I was on my way home with nothing to do - for an entire week!

Most people might celebrate an upcoming week off. They might take the wife and kids to a theme park or maybe the mountains. How about a visit to see the parents? Um, no. But there’s only so much drinking and movie watching that a man can do in any given week. And I watched some of the greats: “Ghandi”, “Pulp Fiction”, “Dawn of the Dead”, “Patton”, “12 Monkeys”, “Platoon”, “The Maltese Falcon”, I could go on.

By “Day 4” I couldn’t take any more, or so the story went. I still couldn’t tell you what they were working on. I mean it had to do with computers, robotics, lasers, and wireless communications, but really that could be anything these days. And a renovation shutdown of the Fishbowls didn’t make any sense at all. It’s not like they were going to put down tile floors and new back splashes.

Even the internet which answers all questions, led me in too many directions. I began with a search for “secret government programs”. Simple enough and I got everything from hyperspace propulsion engines, to next generation nuclear bombs, Area 51 alien contact, bio weapons delivery

systems and even artificial food products.

Nothing seemed to match up with what I had seen in the Fishbowls. But really, what had I seen? In all these years of working there, what had I seen?

## Chapter 8 - It's Good to be Back, or Is it?

Fresh from my week away. Not really. I was tired, bloated and hung over. I guess I felt like most people do after a long vacation. And the 'welcome back'? Well it was exactly what I had expected. Even Bob wasn't talking. Textbook routine down here.

Quick glance of the place and I couldn't tell you what they actually renovated down here. Nothing had changed at all. Same sterile environment. Same floors that I'd intimately swept for the last - I don't know how many - years. Fishbowls unchanged. Same smell. Same galley. Same everything. What. The. Fuck?

And that same constant monotone hum was broken by a voice over the intercom. Wait, I didn't know we had an intercom.

"All personnel please report to Conference Room 1 at 0930". The message repeated. Guess I better go too.

I ran into Bob a few minutes later by the restroom. "You know what this is about?"

Bob replied, "No idea." then looked down at his mop bucket and continued his work.

That was the most we'd spoken since I started. Actually, that was the most

I'd spoken with anyone down here and I could probably get fired for it. Damn shame but regulations are regulations.

0920 and the fish are leaving their bowls and swimming towards the conference room. A steady stream of white coats and military garb filing into CR1. Even Bob was headed that way. Guess I better join them. Hope they have doughnuts.

0927 and CR1 is filled to the gills. White coats, military brass and what looked like some heavy hitters that I'd never seen before. Standing room only and I'm relegated to the back along with Bob. It was hard for me to see up front through the coats and uniforms. And the wash of thick murmur made it impossible to pick out what was being said individually.

Up front was something large covered by a grey blanket. Sized about that of a refrigerator freezer combo it seemed to be the focus of attention. This could be what everyone has been working on and finally I can get some questions answered.

This must be it. In walked an Air Force 3 Star along with two aides. Quiet quickly shrouded the conference room.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, it's been a long journey these several years. I just want to thank you for your tireless dedication to this project. A project that we in Washington believe will be an incredible leap forward in artificial intelligence and strategic defense. In short, Americans will sleep comfortably tonight and for many nights to come because of what you've done here."

An enthusiastic applause filled CR1. The 3 Star's aides pulled off the grey blanket. Gasps, like they've just seen a great work of art, then an almost as enthusiastic applause resumed.

The 3 Star continued "Ladies and Gentlemen, I present you with X84." He paused. "Artificial intelligence meets the latest generation robotics. It can think faster, work harder, and without a doubt, make better decisions than human beings ever could."

There was more enthusiastic applause. And I finally got to see what had been under the grey blanket, what we had been working for. Yes it was about the size of a refrigerator freezer combo. Flat, dark grey in color. A few blinking lights colored yellow and red. What I'm guessing was a small display screen about 8 inches across. Some blue lighted text appearing on it.

I pressed forward but it was too crowded and the fish didn't want to give. It had arm appendages that looked like a cheap copy of a 1950's era science fiction movie. Instead of hands there were hooks or grips. Something like that. I tried to see the bottom but with the sea of white coats and military garb it was hard to distinguish. I did make out what looked like tracks for a tank.

In all the gabber and walla, I'm guessing General 3 Star had ordered the X84 fired up because there was the sound of pistons driven by air pressure. Lights on the thing started to flash rapidly. The audience gasped more then quieted.

General 3 Star continued, "Ladies and Gentlemen you are witnessing the greatest technical achievement of all humankind."

The X84 robot or whatever it was chunked forward and made a gurgle sound. The crowd backed up. I was now glad to be in the back of the room. The machine continued it's slow progress. It spewed a series of garbled synthetic sounds and extended its right arm grip thing forward. Was it trying to greet the crowd?

At this point you'd think I had some answers. Instead I was crunched into a conference room with a mass of sardines looking at "the greatest technical achievement of all humankind". But you want to know what I was really thinking?

I was thinking, "what the fuck am I looking at?" Because by first appearance, this looked like nothing more than a 5th grader's science experiment. X84 was, in my opinion, a giant hunk of shit with a few flashing lights.

It clumsily lurched forward and the crowd parted for it. In a garbled synthetic sputter I think I made out “Pleased to meet you”. This mesmerized the crowd. They really were celebrating their accomplishment. I couldn’t believe it.

This pile of junk, X84, or whatever, is limping in a slow circle in front of a crowd of the best and brightest minds. And the best and brightest love it!

Now I could get a little better look at the thing. Those tank tracks were at the bottom of short leg appendages. So it could sort of walk I guess but also roll. And it was leaking fluid. Oil or hydraulic I guess. I mean really, the government spent years designing and building THIS?

Then came the champagne. Bottles and glasses were brought in. It was a celebration all right as the fish went wild with joy.

3 Star chimed in, “None for the X84, got it.” And the crowd roared and cheered. This was actually happening and I had tears in my eyes. Tears because I couldn’t believe the “almost rapture” in a room full of supposed geniuses. All of them reacting to their crowing achievement.

X84 continued its slow, limping circle leaving a slime trail of mystery fluid in its wake. The crowd had not lost a bit of excitement.

In the clamor, a female white coat handed me a glass of champagne. “Isn’t it amazing!!” she exclaimed. I couldn’t respond. I downed the glass in one gulp then left the room. I’m sure that nobody noticed.



You could hear it from down the hall. You couldn't miss it though I desperately wanted to. The celebration continued in Conference Room 1 and X84 was the reason for the party. The restroom was my only option. Besides, I was sick. My week off had been nothing more than a river of self-destruction ending in a stagnate pool of cheap whiskey. And with what I'd just been through as well as that gush of champagne, I needed to vomit.

And I did. All in Bob's immaculate bathroom. Disgusting, but no mess as I hit my mark. I always hit my mark when I puke.

All these years I worked here. I watched them thinking this was big. Monumental in fact. How could it turn out like this? Not the whole "me puking in the shitter". That part I get. I mean the X84 robot thing. I don't know how many years as I've only been here 8, but how many were they working on this? THIS?

In my worst drunken stupor I probably could have made something better and it would have only taken me a three day weekend.

It's still going on out there. The celebration. I can hear it even in the restroom over the fart fans. And I bet you want answers. The "hows" and "whys". You think I have an answer for this?

I can only imagine how much of our taxpayer money went into this program. Years of continuous work and several departments. Scientists, computer engineers, military personnel, janitorial staff. Millions. Billions. Oh shit maybe even trillions?

I feel like a kid who just found out that there's no Santa Claus, Easter Bunny and that their mom had been sleeping with the mailman all at the same time. Not only that, I can't tell a soul. I have a clearance and all. They'd probably arrest me and throw me in prison. Or worse, shoot me.

But then, who'd believe this? I know I wouldn't.

And just when I thought it couldn't get worse, it did. That celebratory noise got louder like it was coming this way, because it was. I splashed some water on my face and rinsed my mouth to get that acid taste out.

First thing I saw when I opened the restroom door was that thing limping down the hallway flanked by happy white coats and followed by what looked like everyone else. Oh it was a party and it was heading right for me.

Synthetic garbles, a trail of fluids and the lemmings in tow, it limped right up to me. I came face to display screen and flashing lights with this thing. It extended out its right arm appendage and in a garbled synthetic gabber I barely made out "Pleased to meet you".

Fuck! It wanted to shake hands. I complied as best I could as the crowd roared in satisfaction. Yes, I shook hands or hook or grapple thing with the X84. Humanity's greatest achievement as it pissed fluids all over the floor - which I'd eventually have to clean.

The galley, I'd be safe there. I funneled my way past that limping wreck and though the cheering fish to the galley. Fortunately it was empty.

## Chapter 10 - What Next?

Like everything else down here the galley was sparse. Inside the fridge was a lone, unopened bottle of water. Normally I wouldn't touch it but this isn't normal. I downed that water almost as fast as I did the champagne. Lieutenant Johnson or whomever will just have to bill me for it.

I could still hear the party. They'd come so far I guess. Otherwise why such a celebration? What were they going to do with this thing? Give it the launch codes? Make it President? I could only imagine. I mean, I'd rather have a Speak and Spell be President over this heap.

And what was bothering me the most, I guess, was how much time, effort and money went into the X84. All this secrecy for what? And then it hit me. I probably would have been better off working the fast food joint. At least there you get what you pay for, and probably what you deserve.

Maybe there was still time. Yes, I could be that assistant manager. If I can deal with this mess, a bunch of pimple-faced teenagers would be a walk in the park. Who knows, I'd probably meet my future ex-wife there. She'd come up to the counter with a hair in her burger. Love at first sight.

We'd settle down and have a couple of kids. Then after a few years, she'd get tired of me and trade me in on a younger man with a better job. Just as long as X84 hadn't started a global thermonuclear war beforehand.

That being the case, anything looked more promising than where I was at currently. Meaning 60 feet underground in a sterile galley with only a crushed, empty plastic water bottle to show for it.

That was it, I made my way to the elevators and then upstairs to Dick's office. I was quitting!!

## Chapter 11 - Out the Door

I was kind of surprised to see him with all the celebrations going on. But Dick was in his office.

"What can I do for you Carl?"

Dick didn't look good. Kinda sick like post 'Mexican all you can eat buffet' sick. He was sweaty and fidgety.

“Well Dick, I’m not sure how to say this. I’ve been thinking a lot and I guess it’s time for me to move on”.

Dick stood up. His face was almost green. “Give me a few and I’ll be right back. Just don’t touch anything.” He got the last part out as he crossed the doorway leaving behind a rush of stale corporate air.

I’ve been there. We’ve all been there. Yes, you too. Taco Tuesday had caught up with Dick and it wasn’t going to be pretty. What’s a couple more minutes anyway?

Well a couple minutes turned into ten which bled into twenty. Had the man died? Maybe he was really sick and just went home? I had spent the past ten minutes scanning his desk. Stacks of paperwork scattered everywhere and I was growing a little impatient.

What the hell, I was quitting anyways. So I did what I probably shouldn’t have. I looked. Shuffled right through that stuff. Most was what you’d expect: typical corporate mundane bullshit that nobody would ever care about.

Then I saw it, X84 SUMMARY, JULY 2017. My adrenaline rush immediately overpowered my common sense and I dove into it. I was so curious that I had shut out my surroundings. A bomb could have gone off out there and I never would have known.

Shocking! From what I was reading X84 was a real project. They were combining the latest in artificial intelligence with cutting-edge robotics and then some. But it was also a test. A psychological test. An expensive psychological test. How expensive? Trillions.

If I had more time with the paperwork, facts and figures, I’d be able to give you some hard numbers. But it obviously went into the trillions!

From what I could tell this was a project with no monetary limits. They created money off the books and funneled whatever they needed into X84. And the goal wasn’t so much the X84 itself as it was the creators of it. And this went on for much longer than eight years. Way longer.

The focus was on the human factor, the creators, and was related to competence, or rather incompetence. They wanted to see how far they could push it. Program participants, both military and civilian, were selected based on psychological testing though the parameters weren't shown in this report.

From what I was reading, the subjects were performing famously, far better than anticipated. Anticipated by who? Looks like that part is above the pay grade of Dick and whoever else this report was meant for.

"EXCUSE ME". Dick was back. He still looked sweaty and green like he had delivered a massive food baby. Mad too. Very mad.

And who could blame him as I was sitting in his chair behind his desk reading his reports. I get it. But how could I be so stupid?

## Chapter 12 - Exit Interview

So they let me go. But I still had the mandatory exit interview to complete. And that was by the same trio of resident shrinks that had given me the psych eval on the way in.

Three of them at a table some fifteen feet in front of me. The room was much larger than what was needed for this. Sparse and corporate like everything else here: a folding table (they got the table), pitcher of water and 3 glasses (I didn't get one), and the usual fake plant. It looked like a corporate military court martial was about to take place.

My 3 shrinks went by “Dr. D”, “Dr. V” and “Dr. S”. And they had the name tags to back it up.

D and S could have been brothers. Both about the same age, I’d say 65 and both with that typical greying Freud beard that you’d expect from the stereotype. V seemed like a post-menopausal hard ass who hated everyone but for some reason appeared sympathetic to me.

She was pushing 70 I guess and maybe had a kid about my age or something. She did all the talking. In front of her was my file. Thick from eight years of employment though I couldn’t imagine the contents since I can’t remember ever doing much of anything.

“You’ve been a great worker and we hate to see you go, this one blemish aside.” She paused. “And what do you think about what you saw.”

“Not much to think about. It’s really not my business.” I replied.

“But you have to think something.” V responded. “Take your time. It’s important.” She gave that ‘it’s going to be ok smile’ to try to make me feel a little eased. It didn’t work.

“No really. I just clean the floors. It looks like the project’s over and I was feeling like it’s time to move on.”

“And your reading of Mister Hayes’ reports had nothing to do with it?”

“No, I went up there to quit. Dick, um, Mister Hayes, he needed to go to the restroom. I got bored and looked through the paperwork.”

“So what do you think of the X84?”

“The project, or the robot?”

“Both.”

“The robot was, is, well...” I paused, “I don’t know if I should say.”

“It’s OK...please.” She had that ‘calming look’ again.

I briefly delayed. “It is a giant hunk of shit. A complete waste of money, resources. I couldn’t believe that after all this time, that’s what we got.”

V smirked. D and S sat practically emotionless.

“But it’s not up to you to judge.” V came back.

“But you asked....”

“Yes I did.”

The three Doctors briefly mumbled to each other while I sat alone thinking of what it’s going to be like to stand in front of a firing squad. Because, let’s face it, I just committed espionage as well as told them that their trillion-dollar masterpiece was a ‘giant hunk of shit’.

They stopped discussing and V came back with the verdict, “You’re free to go. However, your contractual agreement with this institution still applies. You are not to discuss any of this with anyone. Ever. Now have a nice day.”

What could I do? I nodded, “Thank you” and left.

## Chapter 13 - Epilogue?

This shitty apartment never looked so good. My cheap ass whiskey never tasted better. The stack of dishes never more beautiful. Yes I got fired. But it could have been worse. Decades in prison, execution by firing squad. I’ll take a paper termination any day.

Do I miss any of those people? Hell no. I mean I don’t wish anything bad on

them. But I feel like they were a complete bunch of idiots. Morons. Pinnacle of stupidity. Using all that time and all those resources just to make that thing? Think of all the starving children that could be fed?

Really, what did the government learn from this? That you could take a group of specially selected people, feed them unlimited amounts of money and continuously massage their egos. Rinse and repeat for a decade or two and what do you get? A steaming pile of shit?

Maybe the best question to ask is 'what did I learn from this'?

Give me an assistant manager's position any day over that. And bring on my future ex-wife! Who's hiring?