

Overclocked

By Lawrence Clayton

I got the worst fucking luck.

The downtown local broke onto the subway platform like a rogue wave, and I was nearly pulled under by the rip tide. I wrapped an arm around an upright steel column, encrusted in decades of tough, brightly colored institutional paint. Someone had started an archeological excavation, exposing a multitude of layers, geological strata, millimeters deep and no sign of the naked underlying steel. Like a coward I crouched in the lee, waiting for the surge to pass. About the only thing I had going for me was that I was headed opposite the commuters on their way to work.

Sometimes I believe I live inside a giant pachinko machine, I swear. I couldn't decide if it was way too early in the morning or way too late at night.

I felt shaky. Nauseous. Like a shadow on a cloudy day. Too much coffee, my stomach twisted in knots in protest; and the numbing effect of the alcohol was beginning to morph into a splitting headache. I wanted methamphetamines. I wanted valium. I wanted to eat a mile of pussy. I was still technically on the clock.

On a stainless steel edge, I smoothed a crumpled twenty that had until recently lived a solitary existence in the bottom of my blue jeans. I fed it into the slot, and shockingly, the machine accepted it on the first try.

Would you like to add money to your MetroCard? No. I didn't have a MetroCard. I wanted to get one. That was the problem. The solution, however, didn't seem to be revealed on the touch screen. I hit *Cancel*. *How may I help you today?* No sign of my twenty. *Please insert credit card or cash to begin*. I looked around. The token booth, encased in inch thick plexi, stood empty. *Thank you for riding with MTA.*

More Trouble Ahead.

It was going to be a long walk. For a minute I just stood there, looking at the thing. I swear, if a machine could look smug, this one did. I considered digging my ten-inch crescent wrench out of my tool bag and doing a number on its smug little touch screen, but frankly I didn't have the energy. I sighed, probably too loud and too dramatically, and headed up the urine steps into the morning sun.

Technically I was still on the clock. Technically I should have still been at the bottom of a very deep pit in a very tall building on the walkie-talkie with Joe Blow, trying to dial in load sensors whose manufacture and installation had been botched twenty years ago by a company out of Ohio that no longer existed; but then technically I'm not supposed to drink whiskey at work either and that's never stopped me, now has it? Seven hours of this shit is more than enough for anyone, certainly more than enough for Joe and me, and the rats in my peripheral vision give me the fucking creeps, and who really gives a shit if we cut out a little early? Not me.

Fuck this, man. It was kind of weird to be out and about this early in the morning. The light was strange. I had this strong paranoid feeling that I was being watched, but I chalked it up caffeine, amphetamine withdrawal and general paranoia. I checked over my shoulder a couple of times nonetheless. Hey, you can't be too careful. An ounce of prevention is worth a pig in a poke, or something like that.

I picked up the mail on the way up to the apartment. Crap, whole lotta crap. Doctors Without Borders wanted more money. Man, you write them one lousy check and they never leave you alone. What else? Another rejection slip. A CD in a cardboard mailer for Nate. He'd been getting a ton of those lately. The ConEd bill. Christ on a flipping crutch!

"Hey Nate?" If there is one thing I really, really cannot stand, will do almost anything to avoid, it is conflict. My share of the electric bill, however, even considering our 60/40 split, currently represented more than the sum of my total liquid assets, and rent was coming due again.

Nate poked his head out of his bedroom. Actually what we call his bedroom is just a sheet of half-inch plywood drywall - screwed into the far end of our railroad studio. It is a bedroom in that it encompasses just enough space for Nate's futon, and on that he sleeps in there. Not that I've ever actually known him to sleep.

"The electric bill just came in. It's for over nine-hundred dollars." Our power bill had been creeping up for months now. Nate just looked at me. His eyes seemed wobbly. Or maybe it was just me, just that I hadn't slept in a really really, really long time. "And I can't afford it."

He blinked, slowly, like a sick and twisted Disney version of an owl. Nate is ridiculously tall, six-four or six-seven or something and has horrible posture and greasy black hair that he neglects to cut. So why does he always remind me of an owl? Maybe it's the nose. "Don't worry about it." he said, "I'll take care of it."

"All of it?"

"All of it. Give me the bill. I'll write them a check."

Wow, big spender. I handed over the bill. "This came for you too." I said, passing him the cardboard CD packet.

"Cool." Nate said, but he was no longer interested in me. He was already loading the CD into the one computer he owns that actually has a CD drive. A couple dozen fans kicked in as sleeping integrated circuits grouchy blinked the cobwebs out of their collective eyes and shook an electronic leg. A nearly subsonic 60-cycle hum grated on my eardrums, and the temperature in the apartment edged up a degree or two.

Over the months, our apartment had been engulfed by a crawling infestation: what might appear to an uneducated layman (i.e. me) to be dozens of crappy old PCs, stripped of their cases and peripherals; and wired together with red, blue, yellow, and green jumper cables. For a while Nate had been paying me (twenty bucks a pop, cash) to pick them up off the street for him, old computers that people were throwing away. Where he gets the money, I have no idea, because he certainly doesn't have a job and hardly ever leaves the apartment. He is some kind of computer genius - he fixed my pokey old Powerbook up real good, runs faster than brand new now - but we don't even have our own internet connection. We steal internet (via a homemade tin can high-gain antenna that Nate cooked up from some recipe off the interweb) from the Crazy Lady Coffee Shop across the street that is going to be closed soon because a Starbuck's just opened up on our block. Nate is clearly a little crazy, but quite frankly that's the kettle calling the pot black.

It was only ten, but sometimes Daisy can be convinced to open the Good Times a little early; so I took my rejection slip and girded my loins for a nice long wallow. Daisy is a friend, and also happens to be my valium supply, and when she's in a good mood I

can drink for free or half price. And I like looking at her tits. I hadn't been properly laid in a really long time, and the tension between my legs achieved some kind of cranky equilibrium with the tension between my ears. I really needed to score some meth and do some writing. And now I had an erection.

Honestly, I never do speed at work. I only use it to help me write. Nights, I'm an elevator mechanic – days, I'm a novelist. Or at least a short story writer. A thus-far unpublished short story writer. And I need the valium to mellow out the meth; otherwise I get too jittery.

Daisy was behind the bar, polishing the greasy wood surface with a greasy rag in an earnest display of the futility of the protestant work ethic. The steel gates were still down, but she let me in and set me up with a can of PBR and a shot that took some of the edge off. I told her the story of the thieving MetroCard machine, and she shook her head in sympathy, but didn't offer me any free Product. So I had to be content to watch her cleavage, which jiggled pleasantly under the cut-out collar of a black Iron Maiden t-shirt. Daisy's got a bit of a gut, but frankly I didn't really mind that at all. What she has got is a really cute set of tits that I wouldn't mind having a closer look at, if it weren't for that damn ring on that damn finger of her left hand. I wouldn't mind, not one bit.

Feeling sufficiently insulated, or just fatalistic, I tore open the rejection slip. It was from one of your more pretentious literary journals, a story I had sent in months and months ago, and more or less given up on ever hearing back on.

Is it possible to hallucinate a complete page of text? I think that it probably is; and my head was in the kind of state that I assumed that was exactly what was going on. Holy shit. I killed my PBR and reread the letter that wasn't even a form letter.

My rejection slip wasn't. It was a congratulatory note, an acceptance letter. I read it again. *Foie Gras Journal* was happy to publish my fresh and wryly humorous piece. There was to be no payment of course, not even a complimentary issue, cocksuckers, but still. I realized that I was grinning. Daisy landed another ice cold can in front of me, and I slapped five dollars down on the bar. She looked surprised.

"I just got published," I explained, unable to wipe the big goofy grin off my face.

"Congratulations," she deadpanned, pocketing the five. "When? Where?"

I scanned the letter for a date. Over a month ago. Slackers. But that meant that the current issue, the only issue that mattered, my issue, should already be out.

"I've got to go," I said, standing up and taking a big cold fizzy swallow of beer. And then on impulse: "Hey, what are you doing later on, after you get off work?"

She looked at me a little funny. "I don't know. Depends."

"Do you want to come over to my house?" I felt hot and realized that I was blushing. I've always sucked at asking girls out. As a matter of fact, I can't remember the last time I actually asked a girl out. Possibly in junior high school. The deepest pit in hell, half the reason I'm so freaking maladjusted. "Like, do you want to come over and hang out?" I sounded like a complete asshole.

"I don't know...if my husband found out..."

"What time is your shift over?"

"Nine."

"Do you want to meet me over there?"

"Sure."

I gave her our address and left, feeling like I'd just robbed a bank. Nobody ever told me it was THAT easy!

I was headed up to the St. Mark's bookstore, the best and only place I know of to get obscure pretentious literary journals. On the way over, some yuppie woman gave me the evil eye for flicking my cigarette butt onto the sidewalk, and I gave her such a look that she stopped in mid scold and took a step backward. I was King of the World.

Made my way to the rack in the back where they sell the indie rags. It took me a minute to locate it, but there it was, the latest issue of *Foie Gras*; shiny and new. I can't believe they didn't even give me a free copy. Cheap fucks. I ponied up my thirteen bucks (thirteen bucks?!) and hit the street.

As I worked my way south and east, I flipped through the magazine. There I was, right there in the table of contents, my name in somebody else's ten point black Helvetica. Of course they had mangled the title, but whatever. I paged through the journal (I can't believe the crap they publish) not wanting, I suppose, to appear too eager to get to my own story. (Appear to whom? I have really got to get some sleep.) About midway through, there it was, next to a poem about a boyfriend some chick had had when she had been a councilor at some summer camp. I pulled up to a convenient standpipe and started to read:

Dear Douchebags,

My hands are shaking with disgust, making it hard to type. Your pathetic excuse for a lame-ass fucking joke of a so-called literary journal fucking blows. It is literally worthless: I wiped my ass with it and got a fucking paper cut. I can't believe you so-called editors are wasting perfectly good air with your pathetic respiration. Why don't you do humanity a favor and donate your fucking worthless organs to charity? I mean there are poor villages in Guatemala that could use your shriveled undersized testicles and livers. Give me a fucking break...

And so on, for almost four pages. I realized as I read the first sentence that this was not the story I had sent them something like nine months ago: this was the follow-up letter I had sent them after not hearing back from them at all after six months. I'd just banged it out and dumped it in the mail. I'd never even worked up a second draft. Reading it critically now, I wondered if maybe I shouldn't back off a tad on the methamphetamines when writing. "*Goddamn prepubescent troglodytes, writhing around like a bunch of epileptic whores in a strobe light factory...*" How fucking weird, yet hilarious, yet surreal, yet pathetic that they reject my perfectly good story and then go and publish my bizarre tirade. Oh well, whatever. At least I finally got published.

I nearly got run over on the way back to the apartment. I was crossing the street toward our place, at the crosswalk with the light in my favor no less, when a convoy of three shiny black unmarked SUVs came screaming through the intersection. I was rereading my piece in *Foie Gras* again (it grew on me) and didn't even notice them until they were on top of me. No horns, no sirens, nothing; just strobe lights in their hazards and a blatant disregard for human life. I vigorously gave them the finger as they receded down the street. 'Fucking cock-wipes!' I imagined myself screaming at them, 'Motherfuckers!' But then I imagined the SUVs stopping and coming back for me. I pictured them jammed full of Blackwater ex-green berets, bristling with high-tech

weaponry, probably whisking Dick Cheney off to a brunch meeting. I wondered what would have happened if I'd managed to kick one in the fender as it passed: I'd probably get disappeared down to Guantanamo, that's what.

It was hot as hell in the apartment, but the electronics hum had gone down several decibels. Nate was sitting sprawled on the peeling linoleum floor of our kitchen, eating Chinese food out of a Styrofoam container. I don't think I had ever seen Nate eat before. I had always assumed that he stayed so skinny because he spent all his money on cocaine. That and electric bills. But come to think of it, I had never seen Nate do coke either.

"Your friend Michael is here."

Michael McAsshole is most definitely not my friend. He is my drug dealer, and I think he is genuinely psychotic, and sometimes it amuses him to pretend to be my chum.

"Why did you let him in?" Mike is over six feet tall, with an oversized carrot-topped head, and he is an ex-marine (or so he claims). He is radically antisocial. And he sells me my speed.

"He insisted." Honestly, I'm not addicted to meth. But how the fuck else am I supposed to write during the day when I have to work all night? Have you ever stood in ankle-deep muck water at four in the morning, wrestling with half inch diameter 7x19 grease-impregnated aircraft cable? Have you ever tried to sit down and write a chapter after doing that for eight hours? Well, ok then.

Michael was sprawled out on our couch, his big ugly boots propped up on the pillow, drinking a beer (my beer, and the very last one I had in the fridge too, I thought), toying with a plastic Ziploc bag with a bunch of pills in it. He gave me a big shit-eating smile when I walked in. I gave him his eighty bucks. He gave me the baggy. That should have been the end of it. But he just lay there, giving me that weirdo twitchy grin.

"You know," he said, "I've been worried about you."

Nate's computer, (that is to say the only one of Nate's twenty or forty computers that actually had a cover and a CD drive) beeped and ejected a freshly burned CD.

"Excuse me." Nate slouched into the room and retrieved his CD-R from the drive tray. There's never anything interesting on Nate's CDs, the ones he gets or the ones he mails out. I've snooped, looking for porn. All there is is big text files, full of numbers. Math geek stuff. Most definitely not my bag. Nate slipped the CD into a dust jacket and slipped the dust jacket into a padded pre-addressed envelope.

"You know," Mike went on, draining the last of his (my) beer from the bottle and idly picking up one of Nate's old CDs from the end table, spinning it on his index finger like a frisbee, "I think you've got a real problem. I think you've been doing way too many drugs."

Michael does hallucinogens at least three times a week. I think Mike does more drugs than anyone I know.

"I think you should seek out professional help."

I found myself literally leaping at Mike on the couch. Clutching my baggie in one hand, I brought my mouth to within an inch of his big hairy Irish ear.

"FUUUUCK YOOUUU!!!" I screamed.

Time could have stood still, except I could still hear my heart drumming away in my chest. I didn't know what to expect from Mike. I'd never done anything like that before in my life. He's a lot bigger than me.

“Um, excuse me,” said Nate, “I’ve ah, got to step outside and mail something... Can I get you anything? While I’m out, can I get you something? A pack of cigarettes?” Usually Nate sends me out to mail his packages, and pays me off with a pack of cigarettes or something.

The door closed behind Nate. I didn’t know what to do. Mike just lay there on the couch, an old data CD balanced on his finger at a crooked angle, looking at me, twitching. An excruciating minute passed. And another. He looked at me. I looked at him. He opened his mouth to say something.

I never found out what he was about to say, because right about then is when they kicked the door in. It was really loud and it all happened really fast. The door crashed open, and about a dozen guys all in black with Kevlar flak jackets and black riot helmets with clear plastic visors stormed into the apartment, rushing through the kitchen, scattering dirty dishes in front of them like fall leaves on the wind. Before you could say ‘Habeas Corpus’, they had a black hood over Mike’s head, plastic zip-cuffs around his wrists, and were dragging him back out to wherever they had come from.

I just stood there.

A bunch of guys in spacesuits came along later, and started disassembling Nate’s computers, putting them into clear plastic bags, and hauling them away. They tried to take my Powerbook, but I objected. “Hey, that’s mine.” I said, and they left it alone.

Eventually I got myself a tall cold glass of water and took a pill and settled down to do some writing. The guys in spacesuits were still coming in and out of the apartment, but they were reasonably quiet, so I ignored them. Nate came back later on, looking frazzled, but he didn’t say anything about what was happening, and locked himself in his bedroom for the duration.

Daisy came by a little after nine. She had lust in her heart, a ring on her finger, and a bunch of pills in her pocket. Her breasts were just as big and luscious and inviting as I had imagined. She had a wicked scar on one of her boobs, a long white burn mark, all the way down to the nipple. It was slag, she explained, from back when she used to do a lot of welding. A bit of molten metal had gotten down her shirt and run down her tit and into her bra. It looked like it had been really painful. But at the same time, I thought it looked really sexy, in an odd way.

Her thighs were strong and pale, and she was very wet and ready for me. She tasted nice, not like peaches or anything, but clean, salty and tangy. Real.

I remembered that I had to be at work again in three hours; we had to get those load sensors ironed out. But I knew Joe Blow would cover for me.

Lawrence lives in New York City, where he (grudgingly) works for a living