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The Best Way to End Your Life

For some time now, she didn't exactly remember since when, she went to work every day with the love egg wedged firmly in her vagina. The constant stimulation had made her less sensitive, even somewhat numb, down there. No one noticed the extremely faint vibrating sound emanating from her body—it was easily drowned out by all kinds of other noise. Or, maybe, some people actually did pick up the soft droning sound, but didn't know where it was coming from. She thought, this wasn't bad at all, slowly draining yourself dry, allowing yourself to gradually lose all sensation in your body, as well as shedding the last vestiges of empathy with others: an unceasing drill to deaden all perception.

On her way home after work, while she was waiting at a red light, she stared absentmindedly at the snakes of people slithering over the diagonal crosswalks, looking like machines with myriads of moving parts. Line after line disappeared at each end only to be immediately replaced by fresh rows gliding across the asphalt in a chaotic fashion, an ever thickening and thinning stream of movement reflecting in her bleary eyes, every human body reduced to a small part of a teeming automaton. As the green light's countdown finished abruptly, in that little gap of time lasting less than a second, she was like a traveling bag suspended in a lonely vacuum, but then, with a roar of the engine, she was on the road again, herself reduced to a moving particle.

The thought of sex had been hovering in his mind the whole day, like a floater that won't go away no matter how much you blink and roll your eye, furtively appearing at the edge of your vision and then torturing you at leisure with its persistent presence. Time eventually kills everybody, burying all desires in the process. So when someone's really horny, wants to do it real bad, time and desire will team up to torment him with tyrannical cruelty. The question was, how could he get laid? What would it take?

He slowed down and scanned the pedestrians from the corner of his eye. Whom should he choose to do it with? The old man limping along on a stick, every step like slow motion, looking as if a loud scream from some mischievous little boy would be enough to give him a

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fatal heart attack? The no-longer-young woman who at some point had stopped putting on makeup before going out, a nondescript gray handbag thrown over her shoulder, always on the ready to rush, like a moth to the flame, to any discount sale advertised in huge letters—wasn't she punished enough by life? The junior high student who kept adjusting his fuzzy hair, trying hard to act like an adult, thinking that a cigarette dangling from his lips and some casual foul language were enough to make him a grownup? The young girl in hot pants, the fine lines of her pale veins showing ever so faintly on her long, long legs as she was strutting past some people flaunting her stuff, her body harboring a voracious little beast waiting to be let out, her striking appearance mocking and taunting his very own lewdness? What if he accelerated his scooter and spurted right in front of that old man, tapping the breaks just in time, then grabbed that middle-aged woman's bag and dragged her along for a bit, proceeded to make a mess of the boy's fuzzy hairdo and finally grabbed a handful of the young girl's tits before making off with a creepy laugh?

The truth was, all he would create would be a barely appreciable ripple along the outermost membrane of life, when what he really wanted was to charge forward in a burst of excitement, revving up his heart rate as he sped past a bunch of cars at super speed. Afterwards, the infinitesimal dent in the elastic surface of life would quickly vanish again, and everything be as indifferently smooth as before. As likely as not, nobody would even notice him or his exploits.

And even if he *did* all those stupid things, he'd still feel like doing it. Sexual desire was like the dirty clothes in your laundry basket thrown once more into the washing machine that was life, soaked and lathered in trivial matters. All he could do was take these feelings and wring them out, put himself through the dryer, and then find a place to dry in the sun.

He raised his hand to wipe away these thoughts, trying to get rid of that persistent floater in his mental eye. Oh, he knew very well that if he really wanted to have sex, he'd have to pay for it. He sullenly imagined what it'd be like, from the street straight to the bed, trying to place his desire in front of the window like a bonsai facing the sun, letting it wither and wilt and, slowly but surely, go soft and stale, devoid of all freshness.

Eh? Wait a minute, wasn't that . . . yes, it was the woman from his neighborhood. No surprise here.

From the window of his apartment, he could see that middle-aged woman in her home, just visible across a narrow gap in the jungle of apartment blocks. Every night she'd materialize at

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the exact same time. You could set your watch to it: at 11 p.m. she had a shower, and at midnight, still butt naked, she went on the crapper for a long, hard shit. Although she was too far away for him to see her face, he still could sense how hard she was pushing, and picture her face contorted with the effort as she, without being aware of it, started breathing through her mouth instead of her nose. Whenever the woman's body relaxed and she let out a long breath of relief, he did the very same thing; it was almost as if it was him she was evacuating from her bowels rather than all that excrement.

The woman was no longer young, her skin wasn't smooth and supple anymore, her flabby flesh barely kept in check by layers of garments and pantyhose. The moment she took off her clothes, the flaccid rolls of fat were fully exposed. But for some strange reason the sight of that slowly degenerating body set his mind on fire, like a matchstick that is suddenly lit, and his imagination automatically pole-vaulted backwards in time, rewinding the years of the woman's life and rejuvenating her physical appearance. As if watching a video in fast reverse, he pictured her sagging flesh becoming firm again, taut yet elastic as a newly skinned drum. Once he even felt that this new, flexible skin was a necessary precaution against the wild creature inside. He immersed the woman's body in his flights of fancy, giving her a complete skin care treatment, so that by the time the reflection of her body reached him, after having been projected back and forth across the maze of apartment buildings, she was young enough again to make him hard.

Then the lights went out. The late night live broadcast was over.

Every time he was staring at the dark window, he couldn't help wondering in mild confusion why she didn't have a shit first and then took a shower?

And every time the show was over, he'd spank the monkey for a bit. Sometimes he came and sometimes he didn't, and after losing interest he massaged his legs, in particular the more tired one. He tired easily these days, feeling wiped out at the mere thought of the same old sweaty polo shirt he was wearing every day: it seemed almost like they were growing into one, that shirt and he. Those other, younger fellas who were doing the same part time job, they were what you'd call your typical express delivery boys, the kind of guys who'd keep adjusting their fancy hairdos many times a day even though they were wearing a helmet most of the time. His head tilted to one side, he observed his narrow room, thinking that with the lights dimmed and the floor lamp shining on the wall, all contours blurred in the semi-darkness, it didn't seem quite so small.

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He had to do something with his time, right? It wasn't like a guy like him had many options. His current job was a meaningless drag, and the company couldn't care less whether he quit or stayed. It was all part time jobs now, anyway, since one day some boss had come up with the brilliant idea of streamlining things by scrapping the courier service's own scooter fleet and getting rid of all regular employees. They were all what editors of fashion magazines liked to call "freelancers"—quite literally, since the only two things indicating their association with the company were the polo shirt and knapsack with the courier's logo that they were required to wear as they were whizzing along the streets on their scooters. As soon as a customer call came in, they had to hit the road; between rounds they each did their best to find a place to rest and wait for the next call. The good thing was that you got paid at the end of every day.

He was thinking, if he copied the delivery addresses of famous stars or writers or something, and then sold them to fans and admirers, there might be some money in that. Maybe. But he never did anything about it. Instead, he kept lying around at home. His room didn't get any direct sunlight at all, being smack in the middle of the row, and so he had to turn on the lights even in the daytime. He looked at the slanted floor lamp throwing a dim light on one wall. The frosted glass window showed a whitish color, indicating that it was day outside. He liked this feeling of vagueness, the deliberate blending of day and night into a woolly haze, as if his room lay outside the cycle of light and darkness.

The phone rang. A new order. He had to pick up the parcel at the sender's place, then deliver it at the recipient's address.

It would be easy to pick them out in a crowd, him and his "colleagues": their skin, constantly exposed to the glaring sun, was a deep, dark, nearly tar-like brown, their faces always covered with a thin film of sweat; most of them wore loose and comfortable clothes and exuded a distinct smell of cigarette smoke or betel nuts. As they went about the business of collecting and delivering packages across the city, there was a sharp and almost jarring dissimilarity between their gritty, dusty appearance and the much less conspicuous looks of everybody else employed by the courier service, including even the elderly men and women sweeping the floors. Always on the road, that was their job. Oh, and if you took a closer look, you'd notice that many of them were handicapped in one way or another, some more seriously than others. There were guys with one hand or leg longer than the other, or with a sleeve or pants leg hanging emptily, loosely, or strangely twisted, barely concealing the

deformity underneath. A casual observer might be fooled, but if you looked again you saw that something was wrong with them, even though it usually wasn't bad enough to earn them a handicap tag for medium to serious disability.

It was a strange kind of job, if you thought about it. The kind that could only exist in big cities, losing its purpose outside densely populated places. In metropolitan areas, there was much demand for cheap and efficient courier services, and competing companies kept their costs at a minimum by tapping into the abundant supply of cheap labor found without fail in urban conglomerations. As a result, there were whole bunches of cripples zigzagging across town on their scooters.

On the road, he was like a snake, wriggling his way through the traffic in unpredictable fashion, repeatedly squeezing through the smallest gaps just in the nick of time, and forever charging ahead no matter how narrow the space or how crowded the road. There was method in the continuous mad rush from point A to point B, though, no matter how chaotic it might look. Like a machine, he was continually collecting all relevant spatial and chronological data which would tell him when and where there'd be an opening just big enough for his scooter to dart through. At the same time, his brain was instinctively computing the shortest routes, very often selecting the quickest and most direct way long before he reached the next intersection. Day in, day out, it didn't matter what the points of departure or what the destinations were, he was a "through train" of a messenger, his body mechanically handling cargo after cargo as if it had never been meant for anything else. He had a bad habit, though there wasn't too much harm in it as far as the clients were concerned: sometimes after picking up a letter or parcel he'd sit down at a cheap little roadside café and open it, more bored than genuinely curious. Most of the time it were just receipts, vouchers, summons, invoices, documents, CDs, books or magazines, and he'd just give them a casual once over and put them back in the envelope or box. What difference did it make, he told himself, one person more or less opening and looking at the contents of these frequently reused padded envelopes. . .

This afternoon, for example, he'd taken a lazy break after picking up a parcel, and he'd only just cut it open with his cutter knife when the image of that late-night woman in his neighborhood, the shape of her body, suddenly popped into his mind. He squinted, taking small sips of the cheap iced coffee, cloyingly sweet, and thought, tiny pearls of sweat glistening on his brow in the still hot afternoon sun, "I wonder what the woman looks like

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who bought this.”

This parcel was going to an address very near his home. Going smoothly around a couple of corners, he slowed down and looked for a place to park in that dazzlingly acrobatic fashion of his: hands firmly gripping the handlebars, feet braced against the deck, he jerked the scooter backwards with one fluid motion, killed the engine and landed on his feet with nimble ease. Perfect! And extra points for doing it all with a withered left leg.

He pressed the doorbell, and the door opened with a buzz. As he climbed the steps, the cool but damp and musty air in the stairwell reminded him of a dark storeroom filled with cement bags. Raising his head, he saw that she was standing in the half open door, waiting for him to come up.

“Miss Chen? Would you please sign here?” The woman stepped forward with a ball pen in hand, signed swiftly and waited as he tore off her receipt with a crisp sound. When he had handed her the parcel, she went back inside and he down the stairs. Turning the ignition of his scooter, he thought, “So it was her who bought that.”

Back on the road, he soon began to swerve and weave along the empty afternoon lanes and alleys, lost in reverie. Some thought or notion seemed to be hovering on the edge of his consciousness, but he couldn’t quite lift the lid that kept it hidden, like a tightly screwed on bottle cap.

Back in his cramped quarters, he saw the woman appear inside the window frame with accustomed punctuality, at midnight sharp, sitting down on the toilet all in the buff. He took out the binoculars he had bought earlier in the evening that day and adjusted the focus. There she was, her hands fondling something rhythmically and her face twitching in sync. Now she closed her eyes and her brow furrowed with concentration. Like a National Geographic cameraman with a wide-angle lens, he observed every tiny move the woman made with the utmost patience and focus. It was as if he could even hear the moans oozing out between her slightly parted lips.

“Well, this is something else,” he thought, “so you can shove something up into one hole while squeezing something out of another.” Before too long, the woman’s tensed-up body relaxed. She bent forward and sat there with her head resting heavily on her hands, looking as if she was lost in a daydream, or like a drowsy cat frozen in a languid poise.

It was not until after he had watched the whole thing and put down the binoculars that he

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suddenly felt like a voyeur. Of course he had been peeping before, but he'd never applied himself with such expert single-mindedness. He'd even bought binoculars, for goodness' sake.

She was perplexed. Opening the box, she'd found a pink bullet vibrator inside.

Needless to say, what caused her confusion was the fact that she'd never ordered this thing, and now it was lying on the table right in front of her. As she sat there staring at the pink toy in bewilderment, she thought that if someone could see her now, they might come up with all kinds of snappy captions for thought bubbles hovering above her head, such as "Oh? So a love egg isn't *really* an egg at all. . ." or "What the hell, how's this gonna get me off? It's so small!" or "Shit, I ordered this in royal blue!"

She felt that if she kept staring at the love egg she'd develop a genuine resentment against it, and before she knew it, she might even start attributing captions to the thing itself, a kind of dildo monologues. She recalled coming across an article on the Internet not long ago saying that Taiwanese women ranked number one in the whole world when it came to math and science skills, as well as the percentage of them that owned a vibrator. She was baffled by this, because looking back she remembered that all through her school years very few of her female classmates were good at math, including herself. In fact, she'd often got failing grades. But what was even weirder was the notion that all those fashionably dressed women with their immaculate makeup and great sense of color and style, walking around in attractive dresses that fit to a tee and fell perfectly on the body, that all these epitomes of classiness should get up to stuffing things up their vagina in the dark of night. That was an outrageous thought, she felt, downright wicked! An image appeared before her mental eye of a girl with a radiant smile with something dangling out from between her legs, wriggling obscenely, while the girl was simultaneously waving her hand at her in conspiratorial greeting.

Right, hadn't she bought one herself two days ago? It was only when she opened the box that feelings of shame and regret flooded her mind. Two big thought bubbles materialized over her head, both saying the same thing: "That's it. I'm finished." Her whole life was over. Wasn't this just the first step on a long, slippery slope towards self-destruction? Next thing she knew, she might turn on the gas in her apartment, rip out the pipe, seal all the doors and windows with duct tape, swallow a bunch of sleeping pills, turn on the electric vibrator, and then, in tune with the thing's slow, soft humming sound coming from deep inside her body, wave upon tidal wave of sensuality would carry her towards the other shore as she drifted into a

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profound sleep. Only after she'd dropped dead would a neighbor or her landlord realize that something was wrong and call the police. The officers would break open the door of the apartment only to find that she'd been dead for some time, and as they stood looking at her body, noses wrinkled because of the smell of gas everywhere, they'd notice one end of the plastic vibrator protruding from her lower body, still blissfully wiggling and squirming away. How utterly disgraceful that would be!

She looked around her apartment, an old rooftop addition, and all she could hear was the sound of her own breathing, and the dialogue inside her head that would never quiet down, playing out an eternal struggle of conflict and self-denial. Even in her own mind, she was afraid of calling that thing by its proper name. She put it back into the box, and then went outside to throw it into the trash bin. The moment she dropped it into the garbage, she felt a deep loathing and disgust with herself, bordering on full-blown hatred.

He was smiling quietly. From the privacy of his room, the powerful magnification of his binoculars gave him a crystal clear view of the woman sitting on the toilet at 12 o'clock midnight. The folds of her aging flesh, dripping wet and fully exposed, seemed to be spreading like soft wings, yearning for the scrutiny of his riveted gaze. He thought of something he'd read on the Internet just that day about how Taiwan's women ranked number one in the world in math and science, but also in terms of the percentage owning a vibrator. Turned out that it were women like her who helped to establish this proud record, and for the first time in his life he felt this close to something truly great, framed inside a window just a couple of apartment blocks away. Since he had been such an avid watcher of Miss Chen's lonely live show for such a long time now, he had begun to picture all women he encountered in his daily life, young or old, with a vibrator attached to them, in the same matter-of-course way they were all carrying a cell phone on them.

Miss Chen was feeling a bit sleepy, but she had to stick it out and finish her shift before she'd be able to take off her work apron. "I'm well past 40," she thought, "and still I have to put up with this kind of drudgery, putting merchandise on the shelves, moving stuff around, sticking on price tags, scanning barcodes. . . But what else can I do?" If you'd asked her how she'd ended up in the current situation in the first place, she would've had a hard time answering. It seemed to her that she'd simply kept going forward in whatever direction her feet took her,

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and when one day she raised her head and looked around, she found herself in a desolate wilderness, alone in the middle of nowhere, the sky already dark. She suddenly felt like a dirty old rag doll that had been discarded by the roadside and then kicked into the gutter for good measure. Or, maybe, some kind of doppelganger or proxy had been handling the business of living for her up to that point, and by the time her own consciousness and sense of autonomy finally woke with a loud ka-ching, she discovered with shock and surprise that more than four decades of her life had already gone by, and she hadn't even found the time to take stock of all the things she might have missed out on. Sometimes, when she was working at a cash register, letting her gaze wander over the customers queuing up to pay for the merchandise in their hands, she contemplated how her gradual aging was a process driven by external norms and rules that filled up every last second of her time, occupying every last crevice of her being, and how she was forever busy eliminating all that stuff from her mind and body like so much filth. As she was working her way through the line of shoppers, there was a moment when her eyes briefly locked with a customer holding a whole batch of bubble envelopes. For the fraction of a second she thought that maybe his ears had picked up the humming sound of her vibrator, but nothing further happened.

He continued to open parcels and letters to look at their contents. And when he felt that a box or envelope looked in bad shape or had sustained too much damage, he'd rummage in his satchel to take out a new envelope or wrapping paper, a pair of scissors, and some tape or glue to fix it. Was it really that terrible that he did these things? He didn't think so. His work ethics told him that it certainly wasn't worse than a badly wrapped parcel or a battered envelope. All he did, after all, was to open and rewrap it, or replace an unsalvageable envelope with a new one. He never took anything, and so far not a single customer had ever complained. And, in the end, he had to get his kicks someday, right?

That guy just now, he looked awfully familiar, but she just couldn't put her finger on where she'd seen him before. All those invoices and receipts she had to deal with, price labels she had to stick on, price lists and inventory records she had to update, all these things drowned her days in a deluge of figures and numbers. Even so, she was absolutely certain that she'd seen that man somewhere before. Head bent downwards, she kept arranging goods on the shelves and doing inventory counts, taking the opportunity to dust the wares while she was at

it.

He felt that the world was probably getting smaller by the day. Or how else could you explain the fact that he kept running into Miss Chen? Of course, he was very likely the only person in the whole world who was aware of this. He had seen Miss Chen naked, had seen her face screwed up with effort and pleasure, and had also seen her in her working clothes. It was as if Miss Chen was putting on her clothes in an orderly fashion, item after item, just in order to give herself a normal appearance for the moment she materialized in front of him.

Resembling a series of letters he didn't want to receive, these repeated occasions served as an ongoing reminder, or rather a mere hint, that a secret was blossoming voluptuously in some dark corner of the universe, blossoming for him and him alone. It felt like masturbating to a porn movie put on mute. As you watched, you became one with the stallion's body, and imagined the dick on the screen to be your own while you moved at the same speed and rhythm, becoming more and more absorbed until at last you came at the exact same time as the guy in the picture, a wonderful example of empathic resonance across time and space. Sometimes he'd wonder where all those porn actresses went afterwards, or how much time elapsed between the making of the movies and his watching them, in a different country, doing his best to time his orgasms so they'd coincide with the cum shot. Ah, that's how bored he was! Seemed like it was true what they said, that if you jerked off too much your brain started going funny.

At other times he felt like trying something different: would it be possible to watch a completely innocuous program, such as the evening news or some talk show, and whack off to any random person on the screen, man or woman, fat or skinny, beautiful or ugly? He'd actually attempted to do this quite a few times, forcing himself to stroke his cock while watching, for example, a baseball match. He'd be staring at the players in their dirt-stained outfits pitching, batting, running to bases or trying to catch the ball, all the while strumming his pecker vigorously. Occasionally, the camera would pivot to show some faces in the crowd of fans. Many times he eventually gave up, unable to get or maintain a hard-on. Even his dick got tired of his stupid games. Incidentally, at such times the image of Miss Chen would appear before his mental eye with particular clarity, her body somehow passing through layers of reinforced concrete walls to join him in his tiny room. . .

A warm, humid wind was blowing in through the window: it was a lazy afternoon in late

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spring. He was lying across the bed, not feeling like doing anything. There hadn't been any work all day, had there, and he hadn't ventured out of his room at all. He just lay on his bed, motionless like a bonsai, his face facing the window that was barely touched by the sun's rays.

Good thing he had a window. He was gazing at it with undivided attention, like one would at a computer screen, even though there was no soap opera playing. All there was to be seen was the same old never-changing view, quietly bathing in the mellow sunshine and the caress of the mild breeze.

Lately, she kept getting letters from a stranger. A strange man, to be precise. For some reason, she couldn't imagine that the writer of the letters was an ordinary person, and the image of the express delivery man with the gammy leg popped involuntarily into her mind. She tried to imagine his life, thinking that as a kid he was probably one of those students who always sat in the front row, not because they were short, but because of their disability. When everybody else was doing compulsory physical exercise under the scorching sun, he'd stay in the classroom, all alone, looking after his classmates' schoolbags. One after the other, students like him would stop coming to school one day. Hardly anybody noticed their disappearance, and no one knew where they had gone, or what became of them afterwards.

It wasn't until decades later that you discovered that after finishing school somewhere, they had found a job at a district office or a small rural household registration office, where they had been sitting in the same chair behind the same desk all this time, coming to work on crutches or in a wheelchair. An air of impatience about them, they'd answer your questions in a slightly irritable voice. They seemed to be behind every desk, and looked like they'd always been middle-aged, having skipped puberty in its entirety only to move straight from school desk to office desk, where they'd stay until the next of their kind came to take over. But this express delivery guy, he was different. She wondered how he could ride all over town on a scooter with one bad leg, and what he would do if the scooter fell over. Did he have the strength to lift it up again? Did he have family? A girlfriend? How did he satisfy his sexual needs? Every time she received a new letter, these questions would unfailingly run through her head, but she couldn't figure out any of the answers. None of the letters carried a return address, so she had no way of sending a reply. All she could do on those nights was try to imagine what Mr. Delivery Man's lame leg looked like while slowly taking out the love egg,

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which had been inside of her the whole day, and then, enveloped in the stifling odor of her bodily secretions, begin to wash herself and let her brain go blank.

The woman was still going through the same routine every night, and very possibly would continue to do so till the cows came home. But after having followed her late night exploits religiously for so long, he'd finally grown tired of watching the show. She kept showing up at 11 for her shower, and defecating at 12, but he no longer felt any urge to watch her engaging in these quotidian activities. Instead, he was watching TV, and while flipping through the channels he saw a program that said if it was possible to travel on a train going at close to the speed of light, and keep doing so for a 100 years, time inside the train would slow down so much that only a week would have passed for the passengers, even though outside the train a whole century had gone by, and in this way you'd be able travel to the future. So he figured that if he rode on his SYM 125 scooter at near the speed of light for a week, he could go straight to the future, 100 years from now. But what good would that do? Maybe they'd be able to fix his leg by then, so he could be like a normal person? He wasn't too sure about that. Tossing and turning on his bed, he kept rubbing his withered left leg, the one that looked totally out of whack: the thigh was shockingly thin with atrophy, forever putting his entire body off balance, but there was still some muscle on the calf. It restricted his movement somewhat, sure, but not to the point of being a major inconvenience. He was used to it, anyway, never having known any different. However, it did make him, well, reluctant to interact too much with people without any physical disabilities.

When she was sneezing, or squatting down to take inventory of the lower shelves, she was sometimes terrified that the vibrator might slip out. She was worried that she might be found out, just like some married women were apprehensive someone might notice their bladder was leaking when they laughed too hard. But when she considered it calmly, she realized that she was quite safe. Even the sound of the vibrator was well contained within her body, rising from the depths of her private parts through the network of blood vessels to her heart and brain. She was aware of it because she *felt* it, not because she—or anyone else—could actually hear it. Lately, she inexplicably found herself thinking about Mr. Delivery Man's crippled leg with increasing frequency, feeling that she wanted to see it up close, and pondering the exact kinematics by which a shorter and weaker leg threw the whole body off

balance. And then she'd feel terrible for feeling that way.

That evening, not long before the end of her shift, there was a bit of a commotion in the store. A couple in the queue of customers lining up in front of her cash register started to argue about something, and the girl got so angry that she took a bottle of shampoo and poured its contents all over her boyfriend. Then the girl stormed out without looking back, her boyfriend chasing after her immediately, leaving her to face the remaining customers and the shelves and merchandise bespattered with gobs of shampoo. The muzak playing over the speakers sounded particularly tinny as it tried to fill the vacuum after the departed couple's noisy fight. People were still queuing up to pay in a quiet and orderly fashion as if nothing had happened. To Miss Chen it seemed as if the vibrator inside her body was suddenly purring at a much higher pitch, buzzing in her ears with a persistent drone.

He thought the fastest he could go with his scooter was 125 km/h, which had to still be very far indeed from the speed of light. On his way back home he stopped by the store where Miss Chen worked and witnessed a couple fighting in the queue. Luckily, he'd been well behind them in line, so he got none of the shampoo on him. Back in his room, he wiped the table, cleaned up and mopped the floor, and gathered the trash for the evening garbage truck. Then he thought that he should have a shower before he left, make sure he was nice and clean. He took his time, carefully scrubbing every part of his body, including of course his shriveled and slightly shorter left leg. No matter how often he looked at it or touched it, the obvious fact that it was a part of his own body never seemed to hold as much reality as the feeling that it looked like some little kid's leg, not yet fully grown.

That day's letter set her on edge. The stranger in the letter said that he was going to kill himself. His latest missive had started out normally enough, with some talk about trivial everyday stuff, and then there had been some newspaper clippings, comments, or the occasional report about new scientific discoveries. While reading the letter, she had been removing the vibrator from her body to give it a good cleaning. But she stopped short when she came to the last line, a nonchalant postscript, added as if in sudden afterthought: "Oh, one more thing. I think I'm going to end my life today." This time he had finally given his address, as well as the time of day.

But that only served to make her suspicious. So far she had thought it was pretty obvious

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that the writer of the letters didn't want anybody to know who he was. She had never sent any replies, had not been expected or able to. So what was she to make of this suicide announcement, coming completely out of the blue? Was he hoping that she'd rescue him? Or was the whole letter just a practical joke? Would someone who was serious about committing suicide really indicate the exact time and place? And in all his letters, this guy had never given her any hints as to what kind of person he was, or what sort of troubles he might have. . . Such thoughts kept racing through her mind, and her chest felt like it would burst with agitation as she paced restlessly up and down the room. Oh, well. The truth was, she was a little bit excited. A combination of apprehension, indecision, alarm and exhilaration created a kind of pressure cooker inside of her; even her ears were beginning to ring. She thought the best thing was probably to have a shower first. Grabbing a towel with the right hand, she reached inside her vagina with the left before remembering that she'd already pulled the love egg out.

He saw that the woman was taking her shower early tonight. Watching her through his binoculars, he found that she was washing herself in her accustomed fashion, and there seemed to be nothing different about her facial expression, either. He put down the binoculars, lay down on his bed, naked as he was, and began to stroke his cock with his left hand. He didn't feel particularly horny, but he forced himself to keep at it, anyway. His gaze fell on his emaciated left leg, stretched out right next to the right one, which was as normal as the next guy's, and he thought how ugly it was. Even now, after he'd had a long shower and was as clean and fresh as a baby, giving off a pleasant scent, he couldn't help but find himself repulsive.

Time was running out. She was getting more anxious by the minute, her freshly washed body tensing up involuntarily. She continued to pace back and forth in her room, cell phone in hand, trying to decide whether or not she should call the police. The address in the letter was just a couple of blocks away, so maybe she should go over there with them? She made up her mind and pressed the call button, "Hello, I would like to report that someone in my neighborhood is planning to kill himself. . ."

When he was looking back now on the events of that evening, he thought that people were

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brought together by the strangest circumstances. He saw Miss Chen leave her apartment in a hurry and running, all in a flutter, along the street to a spot near his place, where she waited for the police to arrive. He saw it all with his own eyes: the crowd of neighbors, standing in twos and threes, among them several other subtenants from his building, as well as his landlord, who had rushed over from the other side of town. He had quietly mingled with the crowd and watched the hubbub with silent enjoyment. They wouldn't find anybody in the throes of death in there, let alone a room splattered with blood, red and sticky and gruesome. Oh no. He had only just cleaned it up properly. Everything was shipshape, ready for their visit. He would wait a while, and join them a little later.

So it wasn't him who had written those letters after all? She'd never considered that possibility. It had never occurred to her that the writer had simply made up the address. However that might be, the important thing was that nobody had died. Or, well, it was probably more accurate to say that someone would still die, but at least that would be in some dark corner of the world of which she knew nothing. At least that night, in her world, nobody had died. And she had got to know Mr. Delivery Man with the lame leg. She received only one more letter from the stranger, but it didn't matter anymore what it said. She now spent her days wondering how she might arrange getting a closer look at Mr. Delivery Man's gammy leg. She hoped it wouldn't be too long before she did.

Translated from the Chinese by David van der Peet

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