

When I was a child, etc. Then, yesterday, I saw an a/c unit drinking from a puddle behind the office where I wear a tie and answer phones and it occurred to me: machines are the new animals. Think of the mechanical bull. Or the animatronic actors in Chuck E. Cheese plays.

Then last month, maybe three weeks ago, I lay, as instructed by a cumbersome female nurse with braces, completely still inside a white MRI tube. For fifty minutes. It was like being stuck inside the esophagus of a huge human, such as Eddie, who is billed as the World's Largest Child, who is made of something like twenty tons of plastic, who is of ambiguous racial origin and wears a baseball cap and is the centerpiece of Edventure, the interactive children's museum where Lester (coworker, roommate, short white guy with bleached dreads) and I went even though we're way too old for that kind of thing. They have medical marijuana in this state, so, you know, it seemed like a good idea at the time. We moved like an illness through the giant child's body: we climbed up his vertebrae and into his skull, took a slide through the throat, landed on a soft pad spread out in the stomach, crawled through his intestines. I didn't learn anything. None of the other kids seemed to either. But it was pretty fun. But I couldn't look any of the adults, who were there chaperoning their children, in the eye.

Which is just to say that while the MRI machine was digesting me, I was listening to the radio—KNOK, talk radio—on headphones the nurse insisted I take, as otherwise “you might forget you're alive.” She had an accent distinguished by its indistinctness. Like she'd been born in a mall—and grown up there, eating her meals in the food court, attending school in some backroom of the J.C. Penny. I don't know. But I think she was right about the importance of the radio: the voices—histrionically angry and insidiously ingratiating—demanded that I listen. I did. As I did, their words led back to the mouths that made them and the mouths were holes in

faces that were on heads that were on slack bodies that were in rooms with foam-covered microphones and cluttered desks and fluorescent lights and boxy computer monitors. I saw the callers in their wood-paneled kitchens, on their rotary telephones, at Formica tables strewn with opened junk mail. It was somehow nine years or so ago in my imagination: everyone smoked cigarettes inside, unrepentantly. I wanted one.

Meanwhile—while I collapsed inside myself, assumed paralysis, felt myself calcify, fossilize, become dysfunctional—the machine made whirring noises that sounded like a robot seeing and made hammering noises that sounded like a nail gun being aimed at me. Then there were occasional moments when machine and radio silences coincided, when I felt the world retracting, when I felt maybe like an astronaut tethered to but drifting away from a space station. It was terrifying.

Then, finally, when I was on the verge of bursting from the tension of so much stilled movement captured inside me, the tray I lay on retracted. When I emerged, the nurse was crying in her control booth.

We—Lester and I—never got a digital converter box. Same reason we went to the kids' museum, I guess. Plus, the Radio Shack had gone out of business. It doesn't matter. The important thing is, we only got two channels. PBS showed inscrutable kids shows and documentaries about hardship. I never watched it. TBN, the Trinity Broadcasting Network, was Christian. Every time I turned it on, someone was quoting from *Titus*. I kept meaning to get up and check to see if that's even a real book in the Bible. They kept insisting that you—I—sow a seed if you wanted God's grace to grow. By "seed" they meant "money." By "sow," etc. Steve Harvey was a guest on some evangelist's talk show. He did a bit where he introduced Jesus on an

imaginary awards show. “His biography’s been on top of the best-seller list for 2,000 years”: that’s the only line I remember. The studio audience cheered and amen-ed and stood up in the aisles, and I sort of envied their enthusiasm. When I was a child, my dad and I had gone to mass together a few times but the priest always read some sentimental modern parable he’d found on an online pastoral database and it was underwhelming and so we stopped going.

Sometimes, I’d call the donation line—the number was always listed in bubble font in the corner of the screen—but hung up when someone answered. I wanted to see what they’d say, to confirm my suspicion of their cynicism but they always sounded elderly, were sympathetic for the sincerity with which they said a word as empty as “Hello.” The station they worked for was always offering “love gifts”—a six-ounce spray bottle of spikenard or a Christmas ornament depicting the Dome of the Rock or a new, “easy-to-read” translation of the Bible—in exchange for your “donation.”

You see where this is going.

It was a day off, a Sunday. I’d awoken around eleven, smoked a small bowl and an ultra light, eaten a can of chunky soup, flossed until the floss broke, read one paragraph of a Belgian novel, and watched a lot of TBN. At least when I was working I got paid to do nothing. I was too young to be tired. I got dressed, put on shoes, went out for a walk. What I like about it here—I moved here a few months ago—is that everything—even the most mundane thing, even a vinyl-sided shed with a decorative weather vane or a conversion van with drawn curtains or an empty CVS parking lot—is backgrounded by the snow-whitened mountains that surround the town. It’s like living in a dream set in a model-railroad landscape or something. I like it. I like to walk around town and glance in lit windows and see how everyone has arranged their lives.

I was doing that. I was walking down the street, going nowhere, peeking at a family doing a puzzle at a dining room table, wondering if the river was frozen over. I was walking toward the bridge when I thought I heard someone call out “Alex.” I turned quickly and slipped on some ice. I didn’t see anyone I knew and realized I hadn’t actually heard my name—but I did hear my knee pop. It felt good for a split second—like a release, a relief—but then it hurt like it should and I collapsed in front of a video store that still rented VHSs. I fought my way down to a bus stop bench, climbed onto it, called Lester. I wondered if this town had buses. I hoped not, as I feared one would stop for me and I’d have to wave it along and everyone onboard would be annoyed. Especially the driver.

When Lester arrived to give me a ride, no bus had come but my knee had swelled up wobbly and soft, like a water balloon. Lester drives a mini-van. The backseats have been removed to make way for the gear that he will have to transport when the Parliament cover band (he always calls it a “project,” asks me if I think House of Lords is a good name) he’s planning to start gets started, starts practicing, and gets some gigs, when he needs to haul amps and a drum set and his p.a. to a bar on a Wednesday night or whatever. Until then, the back of the van provides a good place to stretch out if you can’t bend your knee. He drove me to a doctor, the first one listed under Physicians in the phone book. I appreciated it.

A nurse eventually summoned me to see Ada Anderson, M.D. I sat on a tissue paper sheet, which crinkled loudly as I shifted. She touched me and asked me if it hurt. It did. She stuck a needle in my knee and drained one syringe-worth of blood from it—and then another. I was a machine getting its fluids changed. She hypothesized that I’d torn my ACL. She sent me to a radiologist, for confirmation.

I swung out of there on loaner crutches.

I'd manufactured the world I required inside that MRI machine—and so then, when I was out of that tight tube and the headphones were off, the nurse seemed a resident of the place I'd invented. I looked in on her in her booth, and it was sort of like looking in the window of a dollhouse and finding one of the occupants weeping. What I mean is, it was strange to see her act unexpectedly, in a way I hadn't determined. She was in the bright box of that room, at the helm of a series of machines, and she was crying. And I didn't like it. It was maudlin. Unmotivated.

I knocked on the glass partition that was thick enough to keep out the radiation. She looked up and got up and made for the door. Remember those Chuck E. Cheese actors? She moved like that, hastily and reluctantly at once.

“Good morning,” I said for some reason when she came out and stood before me.

I would record the rest of the dialogue, but I can't remember it. What she said, in short, was that she was sorry but that she couldn't say but that the images showed a huge mass of white in my leg, my left leg, and that this was “consistent” with cancer. Now I remember:

“But I can't say that,” she said.

“But you just said it,” I said.

“But I can't—technically speaking, officially—say that. I'm just the technician.”

“But you just did. You just said it.”

“Don't worry.” She had stopped crying. Had stopped herself. She had recovered: she was beaming, professionally, like the models you see in posters illustrating various hairstyles in salons. Except she had braces. Which just made her seem dumb. “The doctor is coming. He can tell you. I can't.”

“But you already did.”

“Yes, but I can’t.”

The doctor came in and confirmed her diagnosis.

When I was a child, my mother died of cancer. And three of my grandparents. And two uncles. Plus my aunt Steph, who everyone said I resembled. I had it coming. I’d expected it, unwittingly, I supposed. Now here it was, inside me somewhere, like a secret. Secrets become rumors and spread. I had to tell someone.

I swung out to the waiting room. Lester put down the *Rolling Stone* he was reading and I told him and he cried two slow tears. Which made me feel good. I gloated in my ability to compel grief. It felt like an assignment. I took to it, if only because I had to, if only because there was nothing else to do, nothing but try to reconcile myself to catastrophe, seek some comfort within it.

A woman, a stranger seated before a coffee table fanned with magazines, noticed my glee: we locked eyes. Hers were disappointed by mine. I hung my head and tried to mope.

This was the way it went: I moved through waiting rooms and sat on tissue-paper sheets and people described my body to me, told me its errors.

The radiologist referred me to some other specialist, an oncologist.

A light box hung on the wall like a photograph of absence. The oncologist flipped it on. It glowed vaguely. He hung the scan of my thigh over it. Backlit like that, the whiteness was sharpened. The whiteness was overwhelming. The whiteness was erasing my leg.

“The white shows where the cancer has spread,” he said.

“I know,” I said.

It had overtaken my thigh, was sending out tendrils to seek down my shin and up toward my stomach. It may have sent emissaries elsewhere, anywhere, everywhere. I don't remember how he said it, but *terminal* is the term I remember.

"Not terminal," the doctor assured me, regretting the word, retracting it. I looked away from him, stared at the huge E in the top row of an eye chart behind him. "But I'm afraid that—to be honest—and I may be wrong—you never know in cases like this—I don't want to be too. . . Thing is, I'm afraid that we are going to have to consider—think about, at least—amputation. It may be our only option. There just might not be another— It's just hard to say. But from this—" He tapped the lit image with the eraser of a chewed-up pencil. "I just mean that we could go from there. If we're successful with this," he said, making notes in the chart he balanced on his knee, "then we can put you on a course of treatment."

I'm paraphrasing.

What he said seemed as impossible as it was indisputable. I reconciled the two, which did me no good. I acted like a Civil War re-enactor playing the part of a casualty: I accepted what he said but felt that I was only agreeing with a fabrication. I didn't know what else to do.

He arranged an appointment with a surgeon for a biopsy.

Later, I told Lester. I said, "Don't worry. It's OK. I'll still be able to play golf."

I'd never played golf in my entire life. I laughed. He didn't. I explained the joke, realized that it wasn't one, and stopped talking. He nodded. I went into my bedroom. I closed the door and imagined the shoe that would come on the foot of my prosthetic leg, that would be included and impossible to remove. I wouldn't wear it on my foot; it would be my foot. It would be a plain black orthopedic sneaker. I would have to wear another just like it on my other foot, to match, to make it less conspicuous. But I would already be so obvious with my stiff, mechanistic

limp. But I knew this wasn't true: I'd have my choice of shoe. I'd be able to change it. I'd select it, put it on my fake foot, and tie it—then I'd attach my leg to my hip. But then how would I get my pants on, over my shoe?

I went into my closet, removed all my left shoes. There were six of them—a loafer for work, a soccer cleat, a collapsed high top, a Converse One-Star from my skating phase, a hiking boot I'd worn once. I lined them up. Like a cyborg sci-fi antagonist attempting a disguise, I considered which one would make me look the most human. None of them seemed suitable. They indicated too much forethought. And I'd be conspicuous anyway, no matter what I wore. What I needed was a way to display my plastic replacement, my suffering. I at least deserved some sympathy in exchange for my leg.

I went into the living room. Lester was watching every episode of some early season of *Friends* in chronological order, on DVD. I asked if he wanted to go to the mall with me, to buy sandals.

“It's winter,” he said.

“I know.”

“OK.”

He helped me pick out some Teva alternatives. He bought me a burrito in the food court. We went to a driving range. It was too hard for it to be fun. We went home. I read online about prostheses and the larger field of biomechatronics and an experiment with something called the Robotic Fish, and then I posted an ad for my bike. Fifty bucks, helmet and lock and water bottle included. A really good deal. I just wanted to get rid of it.

Lester knocked on my bedroom door, entered, and said, “You know, if there’s anything I can do, just, you know. . . I mean, I was gonna go to the laundromat now, so if you got any clothes or anything. . .”

“Well, I mean if you could just throw in my work pants,” I said. “And maybe that blue shirt?” The clothes were heaped on the floor. “It’s just hard with the crutches.”

“No problem. No problem.”

But Lester could only pity me so much alone. I started calling people and telling them my misfortune, that my left leg would be amputated, that I might die, that I was OK.

Picture some aunt I haven’t seen since 1997 crying in her Skokie, Illinois, apartment. Picture a grade-school friend sending me a nostalgic follow-up email from his office in Athens, Georgia. Picture my step-grandmother telling me how much my grandfather loved me, how proud he would’ve been to see me now. Picture my father boarding a regional jet at the airport in Columbia, South Carolina, too concerned to even read *Sky Mall* in seat 11 C. Picture everyone I know. See them worrying for me.

I turned the television on: it was on channel 32, PBS. Someone serious talked about war funding and the screen showed a man on crutches. His right pant leg contained nothing, was as empty as a windsock on a dull day. He was about to speak. I changed the channel.

They were broadcasting a service from an Australian megachurch. The spontaneous amens that sound so excited and certain coming from the mouths of American audiences sounded gruff in those guttural accents.

“Blah, blah, *Titus*,” the preacher said.

I was looking for a sign and this—what happened on the two channels—seemed sufficient. The phone number spelled nothing. You’d expect (800) 4-JESUS or something like that, though with ten digits. It was just (842) 357-9567. I’m approximating. I called.

“Good evening. This is Donna. Thanks for calling TBN.”

It was like being back in that MRI machine, manufacturing a person from a voice, making from some words a glad woman, a retired DMV employee, a widow working in a Southern California call center, a lady in a pastel turtleneck, a Donna wearing a headset that smells like the mentholated breath of the employee she replaced.

“How’s it going?” I asked.

“I’m fine,” she said. “How are you?”

“I want to make a donation.”

“Excellent—”

“But I, uh— I want you to pray for me.”

“Certainly. Yes. Of course. I’d love to.”

“See, I’m having some, um, health issues. My leg—it’s going to be, you know— It’s going to be amputated.”

She said nothing. Then she said, “I’m sorry.”

“It’s OK. It’s just that if you could pray for me . . .”

“Certainly.” Then she started, “Heavenly Father—”

“Could you, uh, just say it to yourself?” I didn’t want to hear her beg God on my behalf.

“Sure.”

A silence spooled out until it felt like the line was lost.

“Hello?” I asked. “You there?”

“Yes” came this lady’s voice through wires, across the country. “I’m still praying for you.”

“OK. Sorry.” The notion that this might work—that God might hear her and sympathize—detonated inside me. “Thanks.”

A minute of silence. She finished. She talked me up to a fifty-dollar donation, said that it would pay for two satellites in Sri Lanka, that the people there would know God thanks to me—and that my love gift would, thus, move up to a special edition of the Bible that highlighted passages about prosperity. It seemed like a win-win.

We said goodbye.

“Wait— Does it include *Titus*?” I asked.

But she’d already hung up.

I pictured kids in a thatch hut crowding around a television and watching a slick Aussie pastor sermonize and wondering what it means. Picture me doing the same in the living room of a carpeted apartment, with a computer sleeping soundly in the corner.

My dad was delayed in Denver by a storm.

“I’m sorry, son,” he said, the words collapsing over the course of the sentence.

I’d never seen him cry and I believed that I was missing my only chance.

“I’ll let you know how it goes,” I said.

We hung up, and Lester took me to another hospital, to see another doctor. A blood-pressure machine was stabled in the corner of the examination room. A big guy who looked like he might’ve been a D-II defensive lineman came in, wearing a white coat, carrying my chart, beaming.

“Alex,” he said gleefully, “how are you?”

“Well, you know—“

“Alex, I have a—kind of a weird question for you. Is your thigh—is your left thigh kinda blue? Like there’s a lot of veins. Too many. Like they’re crowded under the skin kinda.”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah?” He smiled hugely, smitten with himself.

“Uh huh.”

“Well, good news. It’s your lucky day: you don’t have cancer.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean you’re fine. It’s not cancer. I could tell from your MRIs. From the images. What you have isn’t cancer at all. It’s just that you have too many veins in your legs. It looks like it—like cancer—kinda, on these images, but it’s not. They were wrong. It’s something called hemangiomas. It’s—”

“Are you sure? But they—”

“Let me see your leg.”

He laughed. I pulled down my pants. He explained some things about my body that I couldn’t believe, about how this condition I had wasn’t even a disease, how it was hardly even harmful, how it slightly increased my risk for blood clots. I shouldn’t smoke. I should take baby aspirin every day. I would be fine. No big deal.

“So no biopsy or anything?” I asked.

“No, no. You’re fine.”

He patted me on the shoulder and dismissed me.

I told Lester. He hugged me.

“Shall we?” I said.

We left. We didn’t stop for lunch or anything. We just went back to our apartment. Lester watched something. I called my dad’s cell phone.

He was still in Denver, frustratedly watching from a crowded Cinnabon while a blizzard smothered the runways. I told him what had happened, that he didn’t need to bother waiting for his connection, that it wasn’t worth it, that he should just get home as soon as he could. It would be easier. Everything was fine.

“Oh, thank God,” he said.

“Sorry for the scare,” I said.

Picture me calling everyone back, retracting my disaster, apologizing.

I called TBN again. A man answered. I asked for Donna. I wanted to ask her what she’d said, how she’d done it. She wasn’t in.

“Can I help you?” the guy asked.

I hung up.

I kept trying to reach her but never could. I called often—morning, afternoon, and in the middle of the night. Once I was patched over to a woman with a voice as bright and smooth as a neon light.

“Is this Donna?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said. “It’s Lana.”

I tried to explain. I was transferred to a manager. He seemed young, sounded like he had frosted tips and listened to Creed side projects. The harder and explicitly religious ones.

“Hi,” I said, “I’m trying to reach Donna. She—”

“Sir,” he said. “Sir, I’m sorry but you can’t keep calling here. We get enough prank—”

“No, no. It’s not that. I’m not— There was this lady I talked to. Donna.”

“I’m sorry, but your phone number is going to be blocked. You can’t keep—”

“But—”

“I’m going to hang up.”

He did, and I regretted ever calling in the first place, ever buying that prayer. Now I’d never know how God works—though I was certain that He couldn’t work that way, that He isn’t that manipulable, that you can’t give Him fifty dollars and get what you want, get well.

There was an error here.

I tried to imagine what God would say, how He would explain it, explain Himself, but I could only conjure a jaw moving hastily and reluctantly at once, mouthing nonsense, uttering scattered syllables I couldn’t reconcile. He seemed animatronic, an impostor, and I began to doubt the last doctor. I realized that his was the misdiagnosis. I felt the cancer spreading like a rumor inside me, from my thigh up my torso, into my stomach, into my chest, through my throat, etc.