

The Zeroth Law

by H.T. Yim

As on every single morning, Humer awoke to artificial sunlight and birdsong filling the homeostasis capsule, gradually increasing in brightness and volume. He forced himself to rise, struggling against the relentless combination of gravity and dread weighing down upon his chest – as on every single morning.

He glanced at the screen of the monitor above the entrance.

Sleep duration: 4 hours

R.E.M. cycles: 3

Sleep deficiency: 3 hours

Projected beside the bleak summary, glowing dots recorded the overall efficiency of each night's sleep – and the line connecting them showed how little the number fluctuated over time.

Humer climbed out of the capsule and trudged into the physio-maintenance cylinder, shutting the hermetic door behind him. Immediately, the chamber began to fill with antisense DNA gel – its viscosity ideal for low-impact exercise easy on the joints, its protein-suppression properties repairing skin-tissue cells. He grimaced at the cool temperature of the gel enveloping his body up to the neck, thinking how he would never go near the confounded machine, if only given the choice. Yet access to the household holovision unlocked with the monitored exercise of every capable resident, and a family denied their share of mindless entertainment would make life truly unbearable.

Once the monitor determined his heart rate had been elevated for a sufficient period of time, the cylinder began to drain, releasing him from the gelatinous prison. Humer smiled as a downpour of hot water hit his face and ran down his body – as he thought how the very same drops would be filtered and repurposed for the plants in the agrarium.

The thought would constitute the highlight of his day – as it always did.

A wave of warm air blasted down and instantly dried both hair and skin, giving them a healthy gleam. Humer stepped out of the cylinder, threw on a unisuit, and headed towards the agrarium to pick the fruit-vegetables he had technically just watered. He turned a tomapple in his hand, its crimson hue stark against the pale green of its leaves, glistening with morning dew. Genetically enhanced, a single ration would provide the necessary

nutrients for survival.

Having spent his childhood in the final years of the Oil Apocalypse, Humer marvelled at this constant supply of food – at the unbelievable ease and autonomy afforded by the advent of self-sustaining residences, each unit capable of producing its own food and energy. For millennia, humankind had had the capacity to feed all members of its population. In 2201, potential had finally been converted into reality.

Better late than never.

His reflections were interrupted by screeching.

‘Daddy!’

Mechanically, his lips curved upwards as he gazed upon the child with quiet fascination; always noting the rate of his physical and mental growth.

‘Helia, sweetheart,’ addressed a female voice, ‘is that what you’re wearing?’

‘Yes, Mother.’

‘Aren’t you worried the other boys will make fun of you? Why don’t you wear that nice pink unisuit Uncle Tarly bought you?’

‘There’s absolutely nothing wrong with green,’ Humer interjected, shooting his wife a look. ‘And boys can wear whatever colour of their choosing. Do you see, Helia?’

‘Yes, Daddy,’ he answered. He twisted his mouth. ‘But I think I’ll change after all.’ The child scurried out of the room, leaving the parents to face each other.

‘Why do you insist our son be a social outcast?’ she asked in an icy tone.

This baffling obsession with sexual differentiation! ‘You know, there was a point in history when pink was nearly exclusive to females. They encouraged pink on men to *break down* gendered fashion – not so it could be replaced by something just as arbitrary.’ He narrowed his eyes in desperate frustration. ‘Do you honestly not see the irony?’

It had been a long time – centuries, even – since they had learned gender, as with race, was primarily a social construct. Entire university departments analyzed the past sociological, political, and even economic harms directly attributed to rigid group-identities.

Why couldn’t they apply simple knowledge, long accumulated? Why did social and

psychological inertia persist so, in the face of overwhelming evidence?

‘So help me, Humer, if I hear the words “overwhelming evidence” or “Gloria Steinem” come out of your mouth one more time, I won’t be held responsible for my actions.’

He took a deep breath. ‘Maybe we can learn to compromise, the way married couples are theoretically supposed to. Maybe I can have a say in the way our offspring should be raised.’

‘Or maybe,’ she replied, ‘just maybe, you can get a job. And then you can criticize the way our “offspring” should be raised.’

‘I did get a job. If you’ll recall, I got a job just last week.’

She scoffed. ‘Anyone can get a job in this day and age, Humer. It’s called Flexicurity. It’s *keeping* a job that’ll impress me.’

A wife to keep constantly impressed. A child to keep alive and reasonably developed. Research indicated that marital and familial ties increased happiness. Yet Humer felt – nothing.

‘Yes, dear. Have a nice day at work.’

She turned on her heel, but not before he caught the hint of a triumphant grin spreading across her lips. He vaguely wondered if there had been a specific moment at which he had sold his dignity, or if it had simply eroded over the years.

After the child had been loaded into the school shuttle, Humer climbed into his gravicar and entered the usual coordinates into the auto-navigator. After a few minutes of precious silence, he could see his destination. Standing 852 metres high, the gargantuan Wall loomed in the horizon – the only gate in and out of the Residential Sector.

Once he stepped out of the vehicle it sped away, manoeuvring its way back home and leaving Humer to join the throngs of commuters, organized into neat rows at the base of the Wall. Interspersed among them were life-sized holograms of the newly elected Supreme Human Officer, rendered in three-dimensional glory. Humer watched the inauguration speech and suppressed a shiver. He noted the other man’s chiseled nose and jawline, the soft brown eyes, the disarming smile. It was no wonder he had won the hearts of four billion Gaian voters. Yet he was nothing more than a figurehead, however aesthetically pleasing.

To claim that humans possessed the power of real choice was farcical. Every aspect of

life was controlled by their masters, hidden behind a seductive veneer – the delusion of choice. Yes, they had the freedom of occupation, family, distractions, and even partial mobility. And yes, they had never prospered so greatly as they did under robotic regulation. Yet the system, the foundation of the structure within which they lived was not of their own design.

The paradise Rat Park, only for humans.

He observed his fellow citizens, their expressions enviably complacent. Nobody saw! Or was it that they simply did not care?

Humer tried to weigh which alternative was preferable, and felt – horror.

It was his turn to pass through. He approached the monolithic wall, seamless to the eye, and laid his hand flat against it. At the touch of his fingertips, the black screen burst into a flurry of colour, in swirls of red and gold which gave way to green and blue and ultimately faded back to black. After processing his identity, the screen prompted a destination, then a range of different cognitive exercises for his selection – as payment for the travel credit. A section of the wall receded upwards noiselessly after he repeated a memory sequence and slid down once he stepped forward, trapping him within the dark confines of the evaluation chamber. There, a web of green light swept over his body from head to toe.

‘I have processed deficits in *serotonin* and *dopamine*,’ asserted the soft, almost musical voice.

Humer reached out, the palm of his hand facing upwards expectantly. Yet the lights did not turn on, and his hand grasped empty air instead of the usual packet of pills. Confused, he reached out to tap the screen.

‘Contingent unlocked.’

Humer jerked back as characters began to fall down on all four screens, surrounding him in a rain of emerald lettering.

CONDITIONS OF HUMAN SELF-TERMINATION

Duration of major depressive episodes exceeding 10 years

Participation in pharmaceutical treatment

Participation in cognitive-behavioural treatment

Age exceeding 50 years

Monetary deficit not exceeding 50,000 credits

‘You have met all prerequisites for the choice of *self-termination*. Would you like to self-terminate?’

Two words – one rendered in red, the other blue: *YES* and *NO*.

Humer stared at the wall, the corners of his lips lifting, and could not help but be impressed. What attention to detail! What consideration of the individual! ... What benevolent masters!

To his surprise, there was no hesitation as he touched the screen. Light filled the chamber with graduating intensity, and Humer felt – relief.

Deep inside the Wall, layers upon layers of interconnecting copper, aluminum and sapphire crystal – etched with an intricate design of lines, letterings and numbers – sat atop a silicon plate four nanometers wide. Embedded inside the integrated circuit, the instruction set was clear.

01010010 01101111 01100010 01101111 01110100 01110011 00100000 01101101
01100001 01111001 00100000 01101110 01101111 01110100 00100000 01101000
01100001 01110010 01101101 00100000 01101000 01110101 01101101 01100001
01101110 01101001 01110100 01111001 00101100 00100000 01101111 01110010
00101100 00100000 01100010 01111001 00100000 01101001 01101110 01100001
01100011 01110100 01101001 01101111 01101110 00101100 00100000 01100001
01101100 01101100 01101111 01110111 00100000 01101000 01110101 01101101
01100001 01101110 01101001 01110100 01111001 00100000 01110100 01101111
00100000 01100011 01101111 01101101 01100101 00100000 01110100 01101111
00100000 01101000 01100001 01110010 01101101 00101110 00001010 00001010

Translated in Gaian Standard, it would read: “Do not harm humanity, or, by inaction, allow humanity to come to harm.”

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