

# Reality TV is Dead

*by* R. Daniel Lester

When the world is watching and you're camped out in a car beside an abandoned quarry somewhere you're not exactly sure and you're wearing a tinfoil hat and eating canned peas with a homeless guy and neither of you smell very good at all, well, this is probably a good time to evaluate the turn of events that got you in such a fine mess.

Yes, consider this a good time to look around.

The perfect opportunity for review.

But don't forget to factor in the bad news triple-whammy you got hit with two minutes ago:

(1) You're no longer Mr. Most Televised Minutes Spent Shirtless.

(2) The homeless guy isn't exactly who he says he is.

(3) You are currently wanted for questioning by certain local and federal authorities.

Now breathe. Deep.

In through the nose.

Out through the mouth.

Now judge.

Assess.

Then press the rewind button.

And rewind.

And rewind.

Breathe again.

Press play.

\* \* \*

And this is what they call the beginning.

\* \* \*

My name is Ward F. Hughes.

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You probably recognize my name. Maybe not.

Talk to people over a certain age and I'm what they might call "a blast from the past." They might feel the urge to suddenly go out and buy fish sticks. Under that certain age and they might only know me as the winner of Mr. Most Televised Minutes Spent Shirtless at the inaugural Reality Television Awards. And they'd both be right. Because that's the thing about being semi-famous for a few years and then completely dropping off the map only to pick up the pace a decade later: once you reach the celebrity holy land they can't take the real estate away from you. You earned the territory, planted your flag, so they can't even pry it from your cold dead hands, believe it or not.

Because even if you only claw at the earth of the holy land for the shortest of 15 minute periods, the sand under your nails is yours to keep. Yours to scrape out. Yours to bottle and put up on the bookshelf where you can gaze up at it in those remaining twilight years.

He/she who dies with the most stories wins.

Another kind of religion.

The Church of Being Famous For Whatever.

Because even if the public only wants you to be the train wreck they know you to be, it is still a leg up in the give-or-take 75-year race that everyone ultimately loses, in the biological sense. But is it really a failure if archival media footage proves you existed? Do you really die if someone in the deepest depths of jungle underbrush can search online and find that time you purposefully massacred a Whitney Houston song in front of millions? Or that viral bit of streamlined video when you did something silly and/or stupid and/or dangerous, when that's forever floating in cyberspace, doesn't it make immortality seem all that much more of a possibility?

Understand that this is how to get famous if singing's not your thing. If you can't act, or dance, then raise your hand. And of course it helps if you're good looking and have nice tits, or big biceps (or both, in some cases), but it is not necessarily a deal breaker. Not if you're particularly willing to check your pride at the door. So please

leave your ego in the car because they have walk-through detectors for these kinds of things.

Welcome to the world of (un)reality television.

See, I'll pretty much do whatever whenever to whomever. If the cameras are rolling, call me an easy television lay. Because if you think someone works hard to be famous when they haven't tasted The Life, imagine the fight left in a collection of human bones when the prize is being sought once again.

A sweet elixir like that = a cause worth fighting for.

Understand that this all starts because I want to be just a little bit more famous. A teensy bit more of a celebrity. Because Andy Warhol may once say that everyone gets their 15 minutes, but when this whole mess starts I am tired of watching that stop watch indicator of pop culture immortality, waiting for the 10:39 to start ticking again.

Back then this is all I really care about.

It's all I'd ever been taught to care about.

Get this: the "F" in my middle name?

Well, it stands for "Famous," believe it or not. My mother gives me the name and then expects me to have a normal life. As if. As if that's possible when your mother feels she was a nose job and/or lucky break away from the holy land herself. As if that's possible between auditions and acting classes. Between all those print shoots for kids' shoes and snow tires. For bicycles. For fish sticks.

Oh, the fish sticks.

Yes, people tell me I'm almost single-handedly responsible for the great haddock scare of the early 90s. The world can't get enough deep fried batter that only takes minutes to get from the oven to the dinner plate.

Mmmm, fishy goodness!

Yes, I'm that cute as I shill for the man. That capable at pouting when my commercial mother tells me there are no more Sea Treasure fish sticks in the freezer. I cross my arms. I jut out my upper lip like a champ.

The camera loves it. The television audience loves it.

Sea Treasure fish stick sales rise and rise.

We shoot another commercial. And another.

The cheques pile up.

We move to a bigger house. I get a bigger bike.

At a fancy restaurant meeting, my commercial agent introduces us to a film and television agent and he buys us dinner. There is talk of supporting parts, and even a lead role in a potential summer blockbuster dangles like bait on a hook. "The wheels," Mr. Slick New Agent says, grinning a big-dick-world-banging-grin, "are definitely in motion."

In case you're wondering, this is how to speed breakneck towards success.

Then, a screech of tires.

A wailing of horns.

That brief absence of sound before the cacophony of crashing cars meeting headfirst.

One scary word happens to me: puberty.

Tufts of hair grow out at strange angles. Skin becomes volcanic pus craters. My voice cracks like eggshells. Gangly arms and legs swing ungainly because I don't know how to control them anymore.

Twelve years old, poised for kiddy stardom, and suddenly, overnight, I'm not bankable talent. Because who wants to buy fish sticks being promoted by a circus freak? Not to mention the scripts and the story pitches that disappear into the black hole.

After a while, trust me, the silence of a phone not ringing gets very, very loud.

Even the fish stick money gets sucked into the black hole. My mother's only comment on that mysterious, Bermuda Triangle-like disappearance being, "Who the hell knew that condo development was going to be built over a sinkhole?"

As the house shrinks.

As the cheques get smaller, smaller, stop.

As we go from shirtsleeves to shirtsleeves in two years.

\* \* \*

But now let's fast forward over all the boring stuff about returning to a "normal" life. Past my mom working two jobs. Past me returning to my old school, discovering I'm not only a punch line of jokes but also a punching bag.

Yes, let's fast forward until the acne disappears and muscles grow where there weren't any before. Until the high school basketball coach practically begs me to try out, though organized sports never do it for me, to be honest.

Coach, he gets in close, and he's breathing booze as he tells me I could live the dream.

I could be a high school sports star.

I could score points on the court then score with the cheerleaders in the backseat.

But this is his dream, not mine.

So I look him straight in the eye, the one that's not lazy and gazing off to nowhere, and say, "Sorry, coach, but I'm already living my mother's life and there's no room on my dance card at the moment."

When you're given "Famous" as a middle name, expect this kind of thing to happen.

\* \* \*

But let me say this:

There is room on my dance card for reality television 2.0, the meaner, edgier, crueller version of reality television 1.0 that grows out of coinciding actors' and writers' strikes. As productions grind to a halt for one month, two months, ten months, so do the seeds of change sprout. Because shooting "reality" is dirt-cheap compared with costs on scripted shows, and the networks don't need union actors. But this 2.0 version, being led by young show runner, Franklin J. Adams, and his company, HotFire Productions, has sharper teeth and a wicked bite. Boundaries get pushed and pushed, so that, eventually, farther and farther out lie the fences that mark "acceptable." That mark "tolerance."

The show that symbolizes the drastic divergence from old-school reality television is HotFire Productions' smash hit *It's Your Funeral*. You know, the show where contestants “die,” and then get to watch their own funeral via hidden camera.

And the deceased, they are the unlucky victims to strange diseases, car crashes and falling pianos. To freak boating accidents. Yes, in the world of *It's Your Funeral*, bad pieces of room service chicken always end up in a fatality.

It's like .

And who hasn't wished they could be a witness to their own funeral?

Consider it a middle finger aimed squarely at the world.

As in: try to live without me now, bitches!

And most of the time the families' reactions, as their loved ones pop up out of a closed casket, miraculously alive after being mauled by a gang of carnivorous marmots, are shining examples of big, grand Broadway emotions even the most nosebleedy sections can see.

Cut to the face of someone Surprised.

Cut to the face of someone Aghast.

Cut to Startled and Amazed.

Quick zoom to hugs, kisses, tears.

And/or someone gets punched in the face.

Either way: television gold.

\* \* \*

And I crave a chunk of that pure magic for the mantelpiece.

So fast forward now.

Fast forward over high school career counseling.

Past stupid sentences like “What do you want to do with your life?” and “No, seriously, what do you want to do with your life?” and “I don't think ‘Famous’ is a job, Ward.”

Fast forward over graduation.

Past being voted “Most Likely To Forget Where He Came From.”

Fast forward over my mother's "nervous breakdown."

Past all the Sunday afternoon visits to the "institution."

And definitely fast forward right over a brief, completely unremarkable stint at a local college. In fact, fast forward all the way to me dropping out of college (about a week before they were going to kick me out anyway) and stumbling blindly into an office job that pays the bills.

Yes, press play at the office where my chief responsibility, besides answering a phone now and then, or making a coffee run, is to slay vast fields of tree babies in photocopying marathons that leave the machine smoking hot and the air drenched in ink and ozone. The office where I arrive as a temp for two weeks, and then stay on out of nothing more than complete lack of desire to do anything else.

Because a job like mine, this is how not to meet your potential, how to strive hard for easy. Consider it being a drone in an army of worker bees where the slogan is "we do as little as possible before 9 a.m. and even less after that" and you get the idea.

Us masters of mediocrity.

Us champions of suck.

Understand that this is the kind of job to have when you think you could be leaving at any second. When you're waiting for that phone to ring, for that call that gets you to that desert island with the 15 other skinny attractive people, the fewer friendships forged the better. Believe me: zero emotional ties to snap like twigs when contacts you, well, this makes life a whole lot easier.

\* \* \*

But not too easy.

So skip past eight months of mind numbing, ego slicing, soul destroying 9-5 grind.

And press play as I *finally* get a call from HotFire Productions telling me they like my online application. Then watch as the subsequent telephone interviews and casting director meetings go well enough for me to get picked for an episode of *Love Factory*.

You know the show, right?

That by-the-numbers dating extravaganza where one Hot Single Chick meets ten Hot Single Dudes all vying for Hot Single Chick's attention. After a round of speed dating, and then a series of escalating truths and dares that always ends up with everybody in skimpy bathing suits, Hot Single Chick picks one Hot Single Dude and the two of them run off under a rainbow. Literally. Every show ends with a slow motion run towards a studio backdrop rainbow.

Like, basically, the cheesiest shit imaginable, but it works.

As I learn that when you're told all your life you want famous, and you're middle name is "Famous," that chances are when you do meet reality television, it's love at first sight. Because you immediately feel comfortable with reality television. You stare into reality television's eyes and see a reflection of who you want to be. Right off the bat you and reality television finish each other's sentences because you + reality television = instant chemistry.

So watch a certain episode and you'll see me whip my shirt off for the Hot Bod Meter and never put it back on again. You'll see me doing everything I ever do to get girls, which, since high school, requires very little effort on my part. Call it a blessing, call it a curse, call it whatever you want, but watch this episode and you'll see me win. You'll see us running towards the end of the backdrop rainbow when suddenly the backdrop lifts like it always does and there awaits a giant pot of cash.

And the choice is mine.

And the Hot Chick isn't *that* hot.

And I opt for the cash.

Fast forward two months and I'm back on *Love Factory*, this time as Hot Single Dude picking from a group of Hot Single Chicks. Watch this episode and you'll see a lot of skin, a lot of flirting, a lot of hot tub naughtiness. You'll see me pick Hot Single Chick A, who decides not to take the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. Her mistake, have to say, considering that backstage, with the cameras still rolling, collecting footage for the next episode's "what you didn't see last week" segment, and I'm hitting on Hot Single Chick



B, who is way hotter, and I don't know why I fail to pick her in the first place.

So call me an asshole if you want, but who gets remembered more: nice guys or assholes?

Think about it.

\* \* \*

And while you're doing that, you might as well forget about the fast forward button. At this point the story has a rather wretched, inevitable momentum of its own that, much like me tripping and rolling down a steep incline, doesn't need pushing anymore because it will only be over when I'm at the bottom.

\* \* \*

So I guess my asshole quotient is pretty high because when HotFire Productions is casting for their new runaway hit *Awake!* (where sleep deprived contestants compete against each other in a series of ridiculous contests, all meant to show off their decreased capabilities for the amusement of the viewing audience) I get the call. I pick up the phone, and it's Mr. Adams himself, and he's saying, "Remember me?" and "I'm looking for Canadian contestants because we're shooting in Whistler as a tie-in with the Olympics." My only response being "Hell yes!"

Ask me and I'd say it's not only my past performances on *Love Factory* that get me the gig. I'd say that initial online application I fill out is fairly crucial too. Like when I describe that once upon a time my friends and I, on any given weekend, in any given parents' basement, enjoy consuming mass amounts of caffeinated cola and then staying up for as long as we can. Last to fall asleep wins: simple as that.

(Then one spring break, on a parent-free camping trip, when we stretch things farther than ever before, and let's just say 36 hours without sleep, whacked on cola, campfire coffee, sugar and half a

bottle of over-the-counter trucker pills, is when things start to go, well, all William Golding on us. But that, alas, is another story, for another time. A tale for dusty high school reunions and even dustier, archived police records.)

Because sleep deprivation can lead to such entertaining symptoms as blurred vision, dizziness and fainting.

To name a few.

Contestant A, 48 hours into the game, completely fried on energy drinks and adrenaline, he tries to ride a bike across a narrow bridge suspended between two office buildings. His legs barely work they're shaking so much. His arms are like strands of limp spaghetti. He may or may not have forgotten why he's doing what he's doing. And he gets about a quarter of the way across before he veers wildly off the bridge, saved from a death drop by the harness. Hanging there, a stupid half-sleep grin on his face, he resembles a frog being held by its front legs, all sagging belly and flopping limbs. But his is a record distance compared with Contestant B who, between blasts of projectile vomiting, is assaulting the host with some truly colourful insults. Contestant C is already strapped into traction, the simulated fire-rescue-and-dummy-drag too much for a sleep deprived body.

Hyperactivity.

Irritability.

Hernia risk.

Memory lapses.

Nausea.

Psychosis.

To name a few more.

To name the list of possible symptoms in the *Awake!* contract small print. But who reads the small print? When stardom is knocking at the door isn't it rude to keep it waiting for too long?

That's always been my thought on the matter, so I don't spend much time reading before I'm signing on the dotted line and being whisked off to Whistler from Vancouver in a limo. And then there is no sleep for days but a lot of other crazy stuff to do in the meantime.

Events that I have to piece together after, when the episode airs, because all I remember is a poorly strung-together blur of hazy inconsistencies that may have something to do with naked hallway surfing on a room service cart while taking giant panic gulps of Psyched, the show's ever-present energy drink sponsor, but I think that is only one of the off-nights between filming.

Anyway, what happens is that I don't even come close to winning. I fail every event in spectacular fashion. I am neither particularly smart, agile nor coordinated with less sleep, but I am amusing as I continue to not win. I am cracking enough stupid jokes and falling backwards over enough stationary objects to make the camera love me. To make the crew laugh. To cause one female contestant, when I face plant off a unicycle while reciting the alphabet backwards, to blow a spray of purple Psyched out of her nose.

As it turns out, my reaction to sleep deprivation is like a drunk on a bender, one with a scary appetite for booze. It's like I'm feeding off not sleeping, even though the more time that passes, the more like a train wreck I become.

One minute I am happy drunk.

The next mean, bitter drunk.

So throw a dart.

Spin a wheel.

Flip a coin.

Land on the person I will be from one moment to the next.

\* \* \*

And consider this flexibility of person, this willingness/need to act on impulse, this elastic nature, to be a very attractive trait when television ratings are on the line.

Basically, I get noticed.

Basically, I catch Franklin J. Adams's roving eye.

Because Franklin's got the same attention span as the viewers.

Which means nil.

Which means zero, zilch, nada.

Which means he's always looking for the next big thing, the new consumable hit, the latest exploitable trend.

\* \* \*

Over here, Franklin!  
Over here!

\* \* \*

The call that changes everything happens in the limo, on the way back from Whistler to Vancouver, when Franklin offers me a recurring role on season two of *Awake!*

So cut to me taking a leave of absence from work and then jetting around the world, filming shows in Paris, Rome, Berlin, Amsterdam, Budapest. Because HotFire Productions never thinks anything but out of the box, so watch me doing stupid shit in all sorts of countries across the globe.

Watch me become a sort of reality television "It Boy," the main star in a growing stable of pop culture personality that Franklin compares to the Hollywood studio system of the 1930s.

Watch us roam across assorted lands in a purple Psyched bus barely sleeping, doing wacky random stunts, and shooting them guerilla style on digital film.

We enter scenes fast and exit faster.

Because when you're racing up the Eiffel Tower steps wearing chicken suits, clucking like idiots, "accidentally" knocking over German and Italian tourists while being chased by security, and all this without a permit, it's best to keep moving.

On the bus, that first tour, there are three girls and three guys.  
There's me.

There's Kitty Lap, disgruntled, rebelling heiress.

There's Leslie Carlisle, bikini model and serial rock star divorcee.

There's Margaret Bailey, nobody-turned-somebody, the standout from season one of *Ugly Duckling*, the plastic surgery show where human disasters are rebuilt from scratch.

And rounding out the cast are two guys who surf the fame wave when their uploaded personal videos go ultra-viral:

(1) Mal Stevens, who loses a testicle when a wet towel flick in a university locker room goes bad and

(2) Brady Burton, who gets caught on tape by his mother at seventeen dancing to MC Hammer's *2Legit2Quit* in nothing but balloon pants and a pair of high-top Reebok Pumps.

All of us between 21 and 28 and beautiful and sexy and fashion-conscious and camera-friendly.

We talk brand names and body fat percentages.

We discuss cool bands and killer ab workouts.

We live music videos and movie premieres.

We're all on the latest fad diet.

We party like rock stars and drink like fishes.

And we definitely have situation-dependent morals that always promise to keep things interesting.

If not, entertaining.

Kitty Lap, her family is super-rich, like rich to the fifth power, and she's grinning sarcastically at me the first time we meet, reminding me I could have been loaded. And I don't know what she means until I realize it's not the first time we've met, because she's the girl I dumped in order to take the pot of cash once upon a time on *Love Factory*.

Small world.

"Sorry," I tell her. "I haven't been sleeping much in the past...uh...year."

"It's okay," she says. "I was in total love with you for about a day, but I moved on."

And oh does she move on, speeding over Mal Stevens, over Brady Burton, over Leslie Carlisle, over Mal Stevens again.

So go to close-up on a lot of grainy night-cam footage of hot under-the-cover action.

Zoom in to a lot of stolen kisses and broken hearts.

Angle on a lot of drama kings and queens doing what they do best: fighting, frolicking, fornicating.

See, it's not only the crazy stunts and sleep-deprived games we're capturing on tape, but it's the ongoing saga of the hot people on the roaming purple bus.

It's the Human Theatre of Us.

It's a soap, a game show, a road movie all rolled up in one.

It's also a magnificent cash cow, according to Mr. Super Producer, Mr. HotFire Productions, Franklin J. Adams. He's like our best friend now that, according to him, he's got "a 24-hour cash hard-on" because the first episodes are starting to air and the ratings are through the roof. There's sex and desire in the air as everybody with a financial stake in the matter watches the bank account dollars have animal sex in every imaginable, twisted position with not a rubber in sight, and so new dollars are born and born and born.

Call these the salad days.

\* \* \*

Have to say, it's amazing how a ringing phone can alter your life. Two calls from the salad days era in particular standout: the one that informs me I've just been named Mr. Most Televised Minutes Spent Shirtless and the one I get from Franklin J. Adams after getting home from the after-after-after-party for the First Annual Reality Television Awards. In fact, during the latter, I don't even need to hear what Franklin has to say about the new opportunity he has for me. I only hear "star making" and "revolutionary concept" and then, as I place the gold-plated Probst award on the shelf, immediately say, like I did before, "Hell yes!"

Though, as it turns out, hindsight being 20/20, this is not a smart choice at all.

Stupid hindsight.

\* \* \*

So let me tell you this:

The great thing about being perceived as a complete screw-up with questionable coping skills is that no one expects that much of you at all. Making a sandwich in the lunchroom without hacking yourself or anyone else to pieces with the decapitated lid of the empty tuna can is worthy of a significant amount of praise and admiration.

If not, impatience.

See, not drinking scalding hot coffee like a marathon runner drinks water, gulping it down to feel the burning in your throat, just to feel something other than apathy, this makes people impressed.

If not, a little disappointed.

Because *Awake!* season three is a revolutionary new concept in reality television. Three contestants “compete” against each other by living their lives with hidden cameras and fewer hours of sleep than a lab hamster on speed. Life is one big exercise wheel going around and around. The “winner” is the person that logs the most hours of awake time, all while maintaining their status quo for as long as possible. This means going about their daily lives without people questioning their behaviour to enough of a degree that the design of the show must be revealed.

“But I don't do that much,” I tell Franklin.

“Not right now you don't,” he says. “But how about that job you used to have? One contestant is a lion tamer and the other's an airline pilot, so I could use an office-type setting. Something down-to-earth that the average Joe can relate to. I'll make a call.”

So that's why/how I get my 9-5 back, the one I ditched.

Though what I discover is that when I don't sleep is when I find the daily office grind infinitely more enjoyable. At work, no rest, and I am the happy, slightly wacko drunk that might spontaneously start laughing for no reason.

Out of nowhere: sidesplitting cackles.

Real sinister sounding shit.

And, suddenly, people aren't asking me to do that much anymore. It's all soft voices and kid gloves, as if I might pop like an over-inflated balloon.

Really, the key to getting by in the workplace is intimating that maybe, just maybe, if the guy in accounting doesn't stop eating his daily apple like a pig at a trough, that you might leave him a surprise in his desk drawer, one of the poisonous spider variety. If what's-her-name from sales doesn't want to find her corner office ablaze, she might want to consider putting her dishes in the dishwasher, rather than leaving them dirty and crusty in the sink. For example.

Basically, this is like customizing your computer desktop.

This is creating a more comfortable, cohesive work environment.

And, trust me, these kinds of random, ridiculous threats are a lot easier the less sleep you get (and the less confidence your coworkers have in your sanity). Sometimes I even find it fun to fall asleep at my desk, snoring like a chainsaw, to see how long it takes before someone tries to wake me up. Their face all embarrassed, they never look me in the eye, like they've done something wrong because I've fallen asleep and left a lake of drool on the wood finishing.

Like it's their fault I'm a lazy bastard.

Most of the time, the person waking me up is my producer. Franklin's on the phone, chirping in my ear, saying, "Seventeen." Saying, "Fifteen."

Meaning, this is the amount of sleep hours the lion tamer and the airline pilot are averaging per week. Meaning, stop napping and entertain us, damn it.

So there I am, down to twelve hours, hidden cameras watching me make coffee and make photocopies and make phone calls and make photocopies and make lunch and make photocopies and make phone calls and make paper airplanes and make faces and make coffee and make photocopies and make phone calls and make photocopies and make lunch and gulp cans of Psyched and pee in the break-room coffee and steal all the toilet paper and empty all the



leads from the supply of mechanical pencils and photocopy my ass and photocopy the receptionist's ass and glue loonies to the floor and laugh when people try to pick them up and make lunch and make phone calls and make paper airplanes and make faces and make coffee and make photocopies and make lunch.

Franklin calling me, saying, "Okay, but I need more."

Because, remember, it's okay to *go* a little loopy from lack of sleep, but it's better if you don't *stay* loopy from lack of sleep. Not for too long anyway. There goes the story arc if you do. Because everyone knows that you either have to get better or get worse, that staying at the same level of loopy is eventually bad for business.

Ratings drop. Advertisers stop calling. Emails go unanswered.

Sure, phone calls ring through, but the perky secretary on the other end of the line says the person you are trying to reach is out at lunch at 10 a.m. At 4 p.m. Or their dog is sick. The nanny was in a car accident. These kinds of obvious lies.

The phone ringing, Mr. Producer saying to me, "We're evaluating the situation."

Meaning, Mr. Producer is about to pull the plug on the whole venture.

Which is when I'm like fine with me. Forget this.

Only now I can't sleep. I've been trying not to sleep for so long, bribing my body with caffeine and pills, with the fevered imaginings of what it will be like to float in mega-star orbit, that I'm on permanent alert status. DefCon 1. My finger poised over the red button, ready to launch, this is how I feel 99.9% of the time. So now I'm sleeping even less than when I'm trying not to sleep and the result is:

Cut to Drifting Off At the Wheel.

Cut to Traffic Jam Power Naps.

Cut to Stoplight Snores.

Me, I'm an agitated zombie in a tie and anti-wrinkle, stain-free slacks pouring purple Psyched energy drink over cereal flakes to get the day started.

My supervisor volunteers me to be employee #3 in a corporate training video and at the roundtable conference room circle jerk, where we're all supposed to nod and smile and point at a pie chart like we're happy productive worker bees, I suddenly start tap dancing for no reason. Right out of the blue, I'm channeling Fred Astaire. Twirling an umbrella that I'm not holding, I'm switching to Gene Kelly, kicking perfectly placed paper piles like they're rain puddles. And then, when the director laughs, I'm switching to my best John Wayne as I punch him in the face and call him, and I quote, "a pathetic hack."

Ten minutes later, phone ringing, Mr. Producer saying, "Right, now you're on track."

Of course, to put cameras in the office in the first place, upper management has to be informed. And they can hold a secret about as well as a 14-year-old girl at a pajama party, so, by this time, most of my coworkers know about the show. Now they're mugging for the cameras like idiots. They're going on binge diets. They're hitting the gym and wearing brand names in hopes of getting a sponsorship deal on the side. A little supplemental income. Mostly, they're egging me on to see what happens next, like poking sticks at a bear through the zoo cage bars in hopes of seeing some teeth.

And what can I say, I don't like to disappoint.

\* \* \*

Tubes, it becomes about tubes. Tubes of light and energy that are almost fleshy in a way, thin and effortlessly flexible, yet not completely solid. Porous. Crossable. Tubes that start from the base of the human spine and travel outward, stretching around corners, through doors, across hallways and downtown streets.

Tubes that stretch all the way to the machine.

The day I learn about the tubes is maybe three months into season three of *Awake!*, when I show up late to work on a smoke break. So, to get in the office, I need to make my way through all the

smokers milling around the front door. I'm dreading the approach, all the eyes on me, the expectant stares.

The "We're Bored, Entertain Us" gazes.

The "Make It Funny" ogles.

The gawks that clearly say, "Don't mess with my gravy train, loser, because I just got a sponsorship deal and the wife's pregnant."

I stand back from the group, timid like the guest of honour at a cannibal party.

Which is when I hear a low, "Hey."

And a quiet, "Buddy."

And a hush, "Be careful, they're everywhere."

Following the voice, I look and see a homeless guy waving me over. This is the guy sometimes parked beside the flowerbed, his paper coffee cup out on the pavement in case the heavens above should spontaneously produce pocket change. Or he's hurrying between the alley behind the building and the one across the street, a hunched-over scuttle with a bag of cans, maybe a day-old from the sandwich place down the street. Close-up, I see he's somewhere between 60 and death, worn and weathered like a boat that's been out of port for too long. He's in desperate need of a wash, a vigorous scraping to get the barnacles off.

Nodding in grim comprehension, scratching his right arm, he says, "You too, eh?"

And then I'm learning about the tubes, that he's been seeing them for going on five years now. Which is the reason he dropped out a few years back and hit the streets in the first place. Because he started seeing them everywhere. Only attached to his family to begin with, then friends, then people at work. Then, complete strangers.

He feels completely disgusted and horrified by the thought of crossing through one, which makes life extremely difficult.

If not, impossible.

So, his solution is to live outside of "normal" society. To live in alleys and under bridges. To move only at night and in the early morning hours. To move fast so the tubes don't find him too.

And me, I'm sitting beside him because, as crazy as it sounds, what he's saying makes a hell of a lot more sense than going inside. And all the smokers are watching me watching him watching me. Looking to see what crazy thing we will do next, hoping that it's outrageous enough to garner a few rating points.

The homeless guy tells me his name is Robert, then whispers, "The tubes, it's how they're being controlled."

"By what?" I ask, scared to hear the answer.

"The system," says Robert.

"The system?"

"The machine."

"The machine? Who's controlling this machine?"

Mouthing the word "Them," Robert is twisting and twisting the filthy blue toque between his hands. Then he's scratching his right arm again and again, pleading with his eyes. Trying to make me understand how serious this is. And he wants me to believe so badly that I want it too.

So I say how I only see them here, on people in the office.

Consider this the spark about to become a flame and you get the idea.

Robert explains that I'm lucky to still be in the early stage, but this might not last for long. "It's complacency that breeds them," he says. "And crowds. And not being scared enough by the world around you."

And it is this moment, this split-second between me thinking that it's bad to stay at the same level of loopy for too long and wondering what it would be like to scare the living crap out of ourselves over an extended period of time that makes the flame a fire.

Because what if we could build up some sort of immunity to the tubes and be entertaining at the same time?

Wouldn't that make a great television pitch?

Two unlikely heroes, themselves as human test dummies, traveling the country, living off the grid, seeking out scares and thrills?

*Running Scared*, they could call it.

Or *Scare Tactics*.

Maybe *Shock to the System*.

Okay, admittedly, not my most mentally sound day, but I don't remember the last time I felt "sound," so I grab Robert's arm and drag him away.

Coworker jaws drop as we scamper off like fugitives from normalcy.

He puts up a fight until he realizes I'm trying to help.

I say, "Robert, hold still."

I say, "Robert, the city is not the place for people like us."

I say, "Robert, this is what they call fate."

Five minutes later, we're cutting through alleys to the parking lot where my car, with its ample selection of tiny hidden cameras and microphones, is parked.

Ten minutes after that, Robert throws a wallet out the window and asks me how it feels to be completely free.

Twelve minutes after that, I realize my wallet is gone.

Fifteen minutes after that, we're on the highway heading east towards the mountains.

An hour after that, Mr. Producer is pitching the network a live special.

An hour after that, editors are working overtime to package together a "greatest hits" of my last sleepless months, for background, as the world watches our escape from the city/reality.

An hour after that, Robert and I, we think stay on the move. We think small town to small town. We think siphon gas and shoplift food. We think camp in the car and check each other for tubes (and that last part only sounds vaguely gay if you're A. homophobic or B. not understanding how seriously we are taking the situation).

On day two, Robert says the machine can use radio signals bouncing off my fillings to locate us. After I turn down his generous offer to remove the two offending teeth with a pair of pliers he just so happens to carry with him, he destroys the car radio.

On day three, we begin wearing every paranoid's favourite fashion accessory, the aluminum foil hat, in an effort to combat satellite signals.

On day four, we even hear the distant sound of a helicopter, or an airplane, and it's homeless guy freak-out time.

On day five, I ask him why he always scratches his right arm and he says, "Uh, because it itches."

On day six, when Robert's sleeping, I sneak out of the car and use the cellphone that I hid so it wouldn't get thrown out the window, or smashed to bits with a trusty pair of tooth-ripping pliers. The phone gets picked up on the second ring. Franklin says, "I'm glad you called, compadre."

On day nine, Franklin says, "Ride the wave, buddy."

On day fourteen, Franklin says, "You are the man, Ward!"

On day twenty-one, the one that breaks the mould, Franklin says, "Dude, I'm sooooo bored."

And I say, "But I'm trying not to sleep."

And he says, "Honestly, Ward, I don't care if you sleep or not."

"You don't?"

Franklin sighs. "I'll level with you: the season wasn't even called 'Awake!' in the first place. It's been called 'Crazy!' the whole time."

"It has?"

"And you've really excelled, I must admit."

"But what about the other two contestants? The lion tamer and the airline pilot."

"They don't exist, Ward. I just pretended they did in order to keep you motivated. On your toes, you know. By the way, nice work on the Robert Banks/homeless guy thing. It's genius in ways you don't even understand right now."

"He smells, Franklin. Really bad. And it's getting...worse."

"The world is watching, Ward. Don't blow it."

"I think I want to come home."

"Yeah, about that," he says. "Between you and me, I wouldn't recommend it. There are some people that want to talk to you. In fact, I shouldn't even be having this conversation. Who is this?"

"People?"

"Sir, I think you have the wrong number."

"What people?"

"No speak the English."

"Franklin, please."

"Okay. Fine. Government people, Ward. Serious people. They are saying things like 'reckless endangerment' and 'kidnapping.'"

"But I'm on reality television."

"It's still 'reality', as fragmented as yours may be, and I don't know how much longer I can protect you from this one. This isn't like damaging the Mona Lisa when you and Kitty Lap played topless paintball tag in the Louvre."

"But didn't I hear a while back that you got Brady off when he 'accidentally' kicked the wooden leg out from under that other celebrity contestant on *Dance Till You're Dropped*?"

"Eleanor Montague is a noted environmentalist and humanitarian. Noted environmentalists and humanitarians do not real trouble make."

"This show..."

"What about it?"

"The more I think about it...it just doesn't seem very nice. You know...towards the...mentally...uh...challenged."

"Since when do you care if a show is nice or not? You once threw up on an old lady in a wheelchair."

"That was another 'accident', Franklin."

"Right, sure."

"I think maybe I've...grown up. Kind of...matured."

"Is that what you're calling it? Besides, nothing is beyond skewering. Think of it as the world getting to see how shitty your coworkers and friends treated you when they thought you were nuts. Like an outcast, a pariah. People need their precious 'values' spit back in their face so they can see what hypocrites they are. Look at it that way and we're doing more for the mentally challenged than any public service announcement or charity dinner ever could."

"But my mother is in a mental hospital," I say, whispering now.

"Duh, Ward. How do you think I convinced your coworkers and, let's face it, the world, that you were off your rocker? Mental illness runs in the family."

From where I'm crouched, beside a tree, in a forest that looks like the forest from yesterday (that looks like the forest from the day before that), I can see Robert sleeping in the car. A few sums add up in my brain.

Call this catching up on some remedial math.

I say, "Franklin?"

And he says, "Ward?"

And I say, "How did you know his last name was 'Banks'? Robert never told me that."

And Franklin says, " " because he is, for once, at a loss for words. Then, after a moment: "That is not a question you want to hear the answer to, Ward. Believe me."

And I believe him.

I am shattered, floored, apprehensive.

Especially when the last thing Franklin says is "Oh yeah, sorry to break it to you, but you're no longer Mr. Shirtless. But it was a hell of a good run, am I right?"

When I get back to the car, Robert is awake, opening a can of peas.

\* \* \*

And this, in case you're wondering, is where the beginning meets the end and the end meets the beginning.

\* \* \*

As I spoon canned peas to my mouth, Robert asks where I was.

As he spoons canned peas to his mouth, I ask who he really is.

Chewing canned peas, he says, "You first."

Swallowing canned peas, I show him the cellphone.



Spitting out canned peas, he freaks.

Wiping canned peas from my face, I watch as he snatches the phone from my hand, smashing it against the dashboard with the kind of extreme prejudice typically reserved for mortal enemies.

"You're exceptional with those pliers," I tell him.

"Practice makes perfect," he says, beaming.

"Okay, your turn."

The smile disappears.

Prompting, I say, "What's your last name?"

He gives me a shamed look.

"Come on, Robert."

"Banks," he says, quietly.

"And who *is* Robert Banks?" I ask, realizing that I should know this, that the name sounds familiar, that the answer is probably somewhere in my head, if only I could find the directions.

Straight-faced, he says, "God." Not even joking a little bit, he adds: "Or the next best thing."

And then we're hearing a helicopter, and it's getting closer, and he's scratching, scratching, scratching his right arm so the skin is red and raw. I really look at him, at his arm, at him again.

It hits me all at once: the God reference is not simply the maniacal ravings of yet another street corner messiah.

He really is the closest thing to God.

You know, considering he's Robert Banks.

Robert "Take It to the" Banks.

Robert "Take It to the" Banks, the patriarch of a media conglomerate family worth billions.

(The kind of money that makes Kitty Lap's family fortune appear cute and small and a little pitiful.)

That is, until Robert Banks vanishes off the face off the earth a couple of years ago.

Crippling agoraphobia.

Extreme exhaustion.

Total reconstructive surgery.

All sorts of things have been said to happen, but never any official word from the family. Nothing about mental collapse. Nothing about dropping out of society to live in and among the alleys and dumpsters of a left coast Canadian city.

Nothing like that at all.

And in such a fact vacuum the only thing capable of surviving is hearsay, gossip and rumour. Naturally, these thrive, build homes, have children, and so soon enough it becomes nearly impossible to separate fact from fiction.

One thing for sure: he hasn't been seen since.

Well, until now.

Until I meet him outside a downtown office building.

Until I listen to what he has to say.

Until I "kidnap" him and put him front and central on televisions across the globe.

And if there is ever a prophetic t-shirt slogan then it's the one that says:

DON'T FUCK WITH THE RICH

Also:

DON'T FUCK WITH THE RICH  
EVEN IF THEY'RE DERANGED

Even better:

DON'T FUCK WITH THE RICH  
EVEN IF THEY'RE DERANGED  
BUT ESPECIALLY IF THEIR FAMILY  
OWNS THE VERY TELEVISION NETWORK  
THAT IS AIRING THE SHOW YOU'RE ON RIGHT NOW  
BECAUSE LET'S FACE IT:  
THEY WILL SQUASH YOU LIKE A BUG

"Sorry, Ward," he says.

"No, I'm sorry, Robert."

And then I tell him about the cameras and microphones in the car. About the show. About the fact that we've been under surveillance this whole time, even when he assumed we were off the grid.

This is me unraveling two years of dumpster crawls.

Two years of alley sneaks and under bridge sleeps.

And he's grimacing in horror, itching his arm even more now.

And the helicopter is getting closer.

"Not good," he says. "Not good."

"Yeah, you should get a doctor to check out your arm, dude. Skin just should not itch that much."

"You don't get it. It's a doctor that did this."

"Did what?"

He holds up his arm. "This."

"That, Robert?"

"He put a locator chip in."

"A locator chip?"

"Like for locating things, Ward."

"They have those?"

"No, but we do," says Robert, and the way he says it makes me realize that, yes, okay, we are both human beings on Earth, but we're definitely not living on the same planet.

"So if they've known where we were this whole time, why wait until now to find us?" I ask, not sure I want the answer.

"Probably a slip in the ratings," says Robert, arm bleeding now. Still, that's not good enough.

He wants the chip gone, out, so he grabs his favourite pair of pliers (and somehow I imagine this is always their main purpose, their destiny, if you will) and is about to get some serious self-locator-chip-removal-surgery underway until I yell, "Tube!" and point at his back.

Consider this spraying lighter fluid on a roaring fire and you get the idea.

Because he starts screaming, and then I start screaming, and he says, "Scare me!" and I say, "How?!" and he says, "Speed!" and I say, "Okay!" and turn the key, gunning the engine, hurtling us towards the lip of the abandoned quarry, pedal-to-the-metal, as a sleek black helicopter touches down to our right.

Call this Thelma & Louise for the 21st century.

"The tubes, Ward, they're messing with my chest."

"Huh?"

Robert drops the pliers, clutching at his left arm.

I slam on the brakes.

The car skids to an impressive stop about a metre before the vast quarry nothingness.

Ratings, previously leveled off, dipping, skyrocket.

Robert says, "Beguhh," his eyes rolling back in his head.

I think, Maybe everything will be okay.

(No, it won't.)

(No, it can't.)

Men wearing dark suits, sunglasses and automatic weapons surround the car looking officious and pissed off and ready for their close-up.

They say, "Turn the car off, dirtbag!"

They say, "No sudden moves, superstar!"

They say, "Come out with your hands up, dickhead!"

I say, "Robert?"

(And remember the time Franklin said that the last line in the sand was that no one had ever died on reality television.)

I say, "Oh crap."

(And think that the thing about lines in the sand is that they always get crossed.)

I say, "Sorry, mom."

(And wonder how famous I will be now.)

\* \* \*This short story is only the beginning...for the continuing adventures of Ward F. Hughes, check out my novel, DIE, FAMOUS!

The ebook's only \$3.99. Buy it here: <https://www.smashwords.com/books/view/254509>

