

Expiration Date

by Shawn Misener

The drive-through pharmacy is decorated by intermittent signage asking me in what ways I might be ill. Questions like: *Does your head feel too much like a black hole? Are you having trouble holding your penis when you urinate? Is your stool the correct shade of brown, or is it an uncomfortable shade of purple? Does your wife show you her love by looking you in the eyes? Does gravity feel off?*

Ever since they switched from paper scripts to the little rubber balls branded with code I have been inundated with sickness. The cockpit of my jetcar reminds me of one of those old-timey playrooms at fast-food restaurants, a tub of balls that rises nearly to my knees. I need to start getting these filled. There must be so much that's wrong with me, so much that I have left unaddressed, it's a wonder that I am still alive.

After many hours I finally reach the window, and a red-wigged robot leans out, smoking a cigarette and clacking her rusty jaws together. "What can I do for you?"

I shrug and gesture at all of the prescription balls pooled in the cockpit. "Can I turn them all in?" I ask sheepishly.

She sighs a metallic sigh that sounds like air whistling from a tire. "Look at the sign," she says.

"Which one?"

"The one that says we can only fill one prescription at a time."

I don't see it but concede anyway. Doing my best imitation of a prize claw I plunge into the lake of balls and emerge with a rather

bland mauve-colored one. "Here," I say, tossing it into her gaping jaw.

"One minute" she garbles, shrinking away.

Waiting, I consider the extent of my sickness. Every single one of the hundreds of balls stuffed into my jetcar represents one aspect of me that presumably needs fixing. I don't remember what any of them are for, which normally would strike me as strange, but today all I feel is a lightheaded sense of resignation. Bring it on, I think. Bring me to the door of death and serve me a cocktail.

"Here you are, sir, free of charge," the robot says, tossing a large pill bottle at me. Inside is a single capsule about the size of a red potato. "Be sure to swallow it whole, it's extended release."

"But how do I..." I begin.

"Just do it. You're a dead man walking. Now move along." She descends out of sight as my jetcar moves itself onto the exit rail.

I set the GPS and program the autopilot to take me to the beach. I'm not sure just how I'm going to swallow the massive pill but I know that when I do I want to be staring at the sun as it descends into the Pacific horizon. There is nothing more beautiful than that.

John Coltrane is weaving his way through a solo so melancholic I can feel it tracing the furrows of my brain and the sinews of my heart muscle. There is pain there, just like there is pain in the slow receding of the tide as it falls away from the tires of my jetcar. What kind of suffering did 'Trane have to experience in order to conceive of these notes? I can't seem to stretch out my throat enough to get the pill down. Grabbing the sides of my neck I manage to widen my trachea just enough to inch it south, and mercifully it descends into my stomach, where the soft mechanisms of fate can twist and turn in

the realization of my expiration date. Coltrane fades away with an impossibly soft note as the sun peeks one last time above the distant waters, and I can feel myself smiling. I am in place a few feet behind myself, a velvety disconnection, but the smile feels real and complete, as if there is nothing else in the world but the slight upturn in the muscles of my face.

