

My girlfriend Paula, who lately I've been fantasising about murdering, went to Half Moon Bay with me last weekend. I hate these little coastal towns in California, the bland prosperity they exude, the ridiculous nautical trinkets in the tourist shops, the predictable modernity of chic eateries precisely calibrated to make it effortless for the tech worker to throw away their money by the hundreds. The weather is usually grey and cold, no matter what time of year, anywhere north of Santa Barbara.

Paula had picked out a restaurant in advance on Yelp as I drove. We sat drinking chilled white wine, eating excellent seafood, and had nothing to say to each other. This is what we had come here to do, aside from wandering the small streets and presumably, engaging in some other consumer activity, supporting the local economy by purchasing some obscene object such as a porcelain fishing hut hand-painted by a Chinese slave labourer to resemble a fucking Thomas Kinkade painting. There's always options when it comes to consumption: instead, if we wanted to spend money like the thoughtful, progressive class of wealthy people that we are, we could buy a set of windchimes made out of reclaimed metal from a condemned barn by an unemployed Burning Man devotee with a heavy marijuana habit.

I quickly finished my linguini, along with several glasses of white wine, and sat absorbed in my iPhone as Paula finished her meal. Feigning interest or enthusiasm was more than I could handle, and she knew better than to push. Everything else, I could manage – but not that. When the server asked us if we cared for dessert, I curtly said no. Paula looked dejected. For this, I apologised: 'I'm sorry. I just have to get out of here.'

She sighed. She gazed down at her plate, then back at me.

'What's so horrible here, anyway? What's wrong with it?'

This threw me off a little. I didn't really know how to explain.

'Nothing,' I said. 'I'm just tired of sitting here.'

'But you couldn't wait to stop walking around. You wanted to go to the

restaurant.'

'Did I?'

I honestly had no recollection of this. But that was normal, if unsettling every time. My short-term memory was bad and getting worse. It was as if I had blown some mental fuses while programming, and in my analog life, was now operating with impaired functionality.

'You did,' Paula said, solemn, her voice full of reproach. Haloes of light shone from the glasses onto the white tablecloth, and I had the passing urge to slap her across the face. Just a thought, really, one which I would never act on. It was one of those things. I felt trapped by Paula, by her dependency on me. She had her own job, though it paid half what mine did, and she certainly enjoyed the bourgeois San Francisco lifestyle my tech career afforded us, so there was, no doubt, the old-fashioned kind of dependency. But it was the emotional dependency that kept us locked in a death spiral; she needed me to focus her frustrations on.

She was not alone in this. When I looked within, I could see that I was, as well, totally dependent on her: not simply as an object to funnel my hatred of life into – that was true enough, but I spread that around. Even more, as an element of my existence which, like my programming career, I felt I had chosen poorly but was now stuck with, too late to change. Any effort to change would only leave me worse off, in a different and even worse trap than before. In any case, I could never leave. Hence, my violent fantasies, when we found ourselves at the top of long stairways or when I was driving and thought of giving a sudden twist to the steering wheel. Like that very day, in fact, on those death-defying cliffside roads with soaring views of the ocean.

There's a unique kind of exhaustion suffered by the programmer: the brain buckles under the sheer amount of syntax it has to absorb. Rivers, floods of character patterns: curly brackets and square brackets, parentheses, forward and backslashes. Seas of variables, nested abstractions one must trace back, and back, and back, to unravel exactly how the program works. Complex patterns, flowing by so fast you can never pause enough to fully comprehend them all, but must maintain some surface level of awareness of, because inside that ocean of punctuation there are

snags, knots, trapdoors – that will someday confound you, maybe drive you to the limits of frustration.

After we left the restaurant, we walked down the main street of Half Moon Bay. The sun was setting, and it was a beautiful and eerie twilight, red gold at one edge of the sky, and dark, threatening blue at the other. We came in sight of a small plaza I'd seen earlier, with some tables where Latin American immigrant men gathered, killing time and waiting for someone to hire them. I supposed that many of them were homeless, and had nowhere to go.

As we approached, I could see a police officer get out of his squad car, the lights silently spinning, and walk up to a brown-skinned man curled up in a sleeping bag under a table. It reminded me of when I used to sleep at the office under my desk, back when I was a pretentious boy genius flouting office convention. Before I'd realised those kinds of theatrics just raised expectations. We kept advancing, though Paula slowed, started drifting behind me. The cop was saying something to the immigrant. A blip of static burst from his radio, betraying his cyborg nature: the cop was a mere node on a network, a program written by somebody else, many layers of abstraction above.

Then, the cop kicked the immigrant. To be fair, it was not a hard kick – it was almost a nudge, presumably to wake the sleeping vagrant. All the same, the naked expression of power was too much for me. My mind raced with images of police brutality, police murder, that I'd seen on the Internet.

'Hey!' I shouted.

The cop turned and looked at me.

'Why don't you leave that guy alone?'

I walked right up to the cop – clearly, in retrospect, too close. He was shorter than me. Shaved head, thickset. A big, potato-shaped nose. In short, a very unattractive person, and very unhappy-looking.

'Who's he bothering just lying there, anyway?' I said, full of indignation. 'He's just lying there sleeping!'

The cop was dumbfounded.



'Step back, sir,' he said. 'Step over to the sidewalk'

He pointed, with that trademark patriarchal authority, toward his squad car. Paula was standing nearby, terrified.

'No!' I shouted. 'You can't just issue me commands. You're a public servant. You answer to me!' I thundered, pointing at my chest.

Me!

I was the Master!

I was the Master of this cop!

The policeman blinked. This was almost working.

'What's your badge number!' I demanded.

The cop calmly took out his radio and spoke into it, looking right at me without blinking. He said, as I watched him with my heart pounding, that he had a 'drunk and disorderly man accosting him' and requested backup. I then turned to leave. But the cop was just getting started.

'Proceed to the car and stand by it, sir,' he said.

It occurred to me – I remember thinking exactly this – that the way police use the word 'sir' is a perverse inversion of that word's conventional meaning. 'Sir,' which always conveys social distance, is usually an honorific implying respect, even nobility on the part of the recipient, and servility on the part of the person using it. When a cop calls you 'sir,' though, you'd better watch out – what they mean by 'sir' is something like a pure reversal – something more like 'subject': an objectified human disconnected from their social context on which the instrument of authority is prepared to exercise power to enforce the social order. Which they are permitted – no, encouraged – to use violent means to maintain.

I then said in my entitled way, 'Paula, let's go,' which was a downright comical gesture, because directly after I said it, swerving to walk away from the squad car, the cop, anticipating I'd do exactly that, put one practised hand between my shoulder blades and another on my arm and forcefully propelled me to the squad car. A moment later, I was sprawled on the side of it, after having stumbled and fallen into it, hugging it to keep from going completely down onto the concrete. I'd slammed my face into the car hard enough to bust my lower lip open, and could instantly feel the hot blood dribbling down my chin and onto my shirt. The cop hoisted me up,

wrenched my arms behind me and put cuffs on me. In another moment, I was in the back of the police car.

I craned my head around and could see, in the flashing light, the cop talking to Paula. Her face was pallid, twisted into a terrorised apology. She was talking. Her hands were clasped, as if in prayer. The cop's bald head was nodding. His hands were planted on his hips. He was the Master now, he had the power. I looked back at the plaza and with a rush of adrenaline and sense of triumph unlike any I've felt in my life, I saw that the man with the sleeping bag was gone. He got away. My act had not been meaningless. So really, it didn't matter what happened now.