

## **The Hollow Machine**

**by**

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Despite the heat and the wind, I wore my brown fedora. It was a blustery autumn day in which the air was warm and the wind blew even warmer. I usually wore the hat only during rain, but I felt like appearing spiffy that day as I collected my mail from the tin-plated box that read *five*.

I sorted through the mail as I walked back through the labyrinth of the apartment complex. There were walkways going to and fro, this way and that, and almost none of them were straight. The amount of junk mail I had received and lack of anything else had me disconcerted. As I contemplated the wonderful things I might've had received in the mail, a gust of wind took my hat.

I hurried after it down a straight, skinny alleyway, which lay between two buildings of the complex. I found no discernable purpose for this alleyway other than to act as a space between the two buildings, one of them being mine.

My hat had blown up against a sturdy metal box—painted white—that rested on the ground, was as wide as the alleyway, and came up to my waist. I placed my hat firmly on my head and being a curious person, I examined the box. Just like the

alleyway, the box had no discernable purpose. It might house some sewage pipes or electrical circuits, but it didn't matter much to me. I climbed onto it, stood up, and peered into my neighbor's window. He had received a delivery a few moments ago, and I was curious to catch a glimpse of it.

It's difficult to describe the unusual set up of the apartments in the complex, but the window I peered into was just big enough for me to squeeze through if the need ever arose. The window was high on the wall for whatever reason, and through it, I could see part of my neighbor's kitchen and most of his living room, which added up to almost the entire front half of his apartment.

My neighbor stood there looking over a heap of boxes that filled his living room. My neighbor was somewhere in his thirties and had his head shaven clean. We had never talked that I can recollect, but had only exchanged a few nods of 'hello'. There was one time when we walked back from the mailboxes together—almost side by side—and although we had barely acknowledged each other, I happened to catch his name from the outside of one of the envelopes he had carried. Xavier Carbajal was quite tall. He towered above me as we had walked back that day. I had studied his light skin and had expected his eyes to be pink like an albino's, but he had dark eyes. They were almost as black as the blackest of shadows and somehow reminded me of metal.

I stared through his window at him exploring the inside of the boxes. I was hoping he'd take their contents out. I'd been hoping to see what was inside ever since I saw the deliveryman take them to his door just a little while before—at the same time I had happened to check my mail. I felt fortunate to have had my hat blown down the alleyway and up against the box upon which I stood. I wondered if my curiosity alone

would have taken me there. Xavier opened some of the dozen or more brown cardboard boxes. They were different sizes—big and small, fat and thin. He seemed to fiddle with some of their contents, but didn't pull anything out except a small plastic bag of what might have been shiny, silver screws and a few papers which I assumed were either inventory slips or instructions of some kind. At that moment, I knew there was something magnificent in those boxes. I have a nose for what's inside a box. I owe it to being the only one in a one-man shipping-and-receiving department of a business hotel. It was drab work, hard work, but it was thrilling to open up packages when the occasion arose.

My good neighbor put the papers back into the biggest of the boxes and closed the top of it as much as it would close. He patted his pants pockets and then pulled out a set of keys. His shiny bald head disappeared from my view as he moved towards the door. He was leaving.

I jumped down from my box and exited the alleyway from the same opening I had entered. In the alleyway, I was walking parallel to the two apartment buildings, which took me towards the rear of Xavier's apartment (and my own). I took a right and walked along the backside of the building that included Xavier's apartment. I turned the corner again and saw Xavier coming my way. He also wore a fedora which I had greatly admired since the first time I saw it. We nodded and tipped our hats to each other. I took great care to hold mine tightly as I didn't want it to blow away once more. As I said, I usually only wore my fedora during rain, but my neighbor wore his almost all the time, I suspected, to keep the sun from burning his sensitive skin atop his head.

I looked back and saw that he did not turn the corner which led to the mailboxes. He went straight towards the parking lot. My neighbor must have been going out.

I continued to walk along side the building and then took another right turn taking me to the front. I passed a few doors and looked at their potted plants and occasional signs that more often than not read 'home sweet home'. I came to the last door of that building which had nothing of decor; only the number fifteen was on the door. It was Xavier's place.

I passed a skinny, but tall fence painted a sky blue to match the buildings' trim. The fence blocked me from entering the skinny alleyway, which my hat had blown in, if I had desired to do so from the front of the two buildings that bordered it. The first door of the next building was mine, the number five.

I entered and was pleased to feel the air in my apartment was cooler than the hot autumn atmosphere outside. Since I didn't have a coat rack on which to put my hat, I tossed my fedora onto the beige sofa. I made sure to lock the door, something I always do.

Although I had only been out of my apartment for a short period, I checked for phone messages. I didn't have a single one, which caused me to chuckle because I was expecting my ex-girlfriend to call. It was just like her not to call when I expected her to. I sat on the couch; it was parallel to the skinny alleyway I had just been down. And above my couch is a window of the same size and style my neighbor had above the little dining area in his apartment. It was the window I had looked in. I pulled the little window open with a metal stick that had a hook on the end. Being open meant that the window itself was at about a thirty degree angle to the wall. Not even the skinniest

person in the world could get in with the window open. If someone wanted to get in, one would have to unscrew the brackets that kept the window from opening any further.

I had opened the window in hopes of being able to hear Xavier when he returned. I have a keen sense of hearing, but with it being so windy outside, it was difficult to hear as clearly as I normally do. Still, I was certain I would be able to hear him close his door when he entered his place.

The phone rang.

It was my ex-girlfriend interrupting my listening. She was slim, sexy, and cute with shiny, silky black hair, but that didn't help things on the phone. The conversation was difficult to handle and abrasive like a jagged piece of metal. The emotional distance of my ex and the many moments of silence made the experience torture as if someone was raking that jagged metal piece across my face and ears. Through this experience, we determined she would come over the next day at an undetermined time in the evening. I would give her her property and that would be the last we saw of each other.

As soon as I heard the word 'bye', I hung up and instantly began to listen again for Xavier. I thought about my ex. The property she was retrieving was a few CDs of hers that I had acquired. We hadn't lived together or even got close, but I had listened to a few of her CDs and kept them at her insistence, so that I could "fully experience them". I only had two: the Cranberries and Four Non-Blondes. Not bad, but I counted them as no real loss. I knew numerous bands that were better than both of them. When I had shared those good bands with my ex, she couldn't understand how I felt. She couldn't understand many other things about me as well. She was attractive, but she was also rather mean and annoyed most of the time. It was difficult to be with a mean person.

I continued to listen for Xavier, but then grew tired of waiting. I decided to eat. I grilled up a couple of chicken breasts and warmed up some mixed vegetables. I found some bread and juice and had myself a square meal. I ate at the coffee table while sitting on the couch. I refused to turn on the TV or the stereo; I didn't want to miss the sound of Xavier's returning.

For some odd reason, I had the urge to listen to my ex-girlfriend's CDs for one last time. Not because they were hers, but because they were decent and almost seemed to fit the mood I was in—a wistful melancholic mood with a hint of anger. And then I smiled at that thought and stared at the two CDs I had set aside. What a joke my life was! The world a comedy. It made me almost bitter. Day in and day out I had the same routine with nothing to show for it. Not much money, no meaningful friends, no successful relationships, no purpose. I merely existed and floated through my life in an effort to have nothing touch me. I pushed away my unfinished plate.

I don't know how long I had sat on that couch, but it grew dark outside. My glass and plate continued to clutter my coffee table. I moved them to the clutter of the kitchen sink. The excitement and expectation I had about Xavier's boxes were beginning to pass. The next day was Sunday, a bland day. I wouldn't have work or anything else to look forward to. I decided to turn off the lights and melt in front of the TV—something I was accustomed to.

Nighttime had completely enveloped the outside world when I heard the door slam. Xavier was home. My spirits lifted. I had been feeling down and lethargic from the garbage I was watching. I got up and left my hat, which had been sitting next to me all the time. I decided to have a peak at what my neighbor was doing.

Darkness was all about, but it was combatted with all the lights that lined the main walkways of the apartment complex. I passed the door marked fifteen and saw a little light on in the apartment. I quickened my steps around the building and to the skinny alleyway.

My little path, which seemed just for me, was dark. Not much light intruded into this space, and I was confident I would go undetected by any passers-by that happened to look my direction. Even during the day, I was sure no one would bother to look down the alleyway, and I doubted one would even notice me if one did happen to look. I climbed onto my metal box, painted white, to see what was to be discovered.

Xavier was emptying the contents of his boxes by the light of one small lamp. His hat was off, and he wore all dark clothes. I couldn't tell exactly what everything was, but there were many items: metal pieces, metal springs, metal cogs. There were also dials, buttons, and brackets. I also noticed three rather large metal panels and two smaller ones.

Xavier looked to be taking inventory. He held the white sheets of paper that I saw him holding earlier. He looked at what was on the sheet, counted some of the items, and then made a mark with a ballpoint pen.

I watched this process for quite some time and wondered where Xavier's brown fedora was. It seemed natural that, like me, he wouldn't wear it indoors, but at the same time I was disappointed he wasn't wearing it. Wearing the hat made him look more sophisticated and debonair. I promised I would wear mine more often.

I could feel the air getting cooler and heat escaping from the top of my head. I thought about retreating to my apartment to get my fedora, but I didn't want to miss anything. Xavier marked off his list, and I pondered what everything was for.

I presumed he was making something, but I couldn't ascertain if this was true. Xavier had a system, one I couldn't figure out completely. The items he removed from the boxes he placed on the floor or against the wall with care. The metal panels leaned against the wall, and the other items were all spaced out on the floor in what seemed to be an organized way. As he removed the items, he broke down the boxes in which they had come. These boxes were placed on his sofa, which I could only see a part of. The sofa was parallel to and against the same wall as his front door.

I found it difficult to be sure of anything, however, since his living room was mostly shadows. The light he worked by was soft and dim. Except for all the metal pieces and instruments, his living room was sparse. There was the aforementioned sofa against the wall that had his front door. And kitty-corner to the door was a small TV on a cart. That was all.

I wondered if he had cleaned it out in anticipation of this delivery. There was no convenient window to look into his bedroom, so I had no idea if he had moved anything in there.

The wind picked up and was cold. It howled and whistled and brought papers and other trash to the box I was standing on. I shivered, but stayed where I was. I was simply being curious, after all. It looked like Xavier had two more boxes to go. That would make it thirteen in total if I had counted correctly. Of course, there were boxes

within those boxes. I didn't know how many items. The contents of Xavier's delivery began to overwhelm me, so I turned my attention to the window before me.

I looked at the brackets that kept the window from being opened completely and reassured myself that they could easily be removed with a screwdriver.

For the first time, I realized what was behind me. I turned my head and saw my little window that overlooked my living room and sat above my couch. I was curious to look in, but figured it could wait until I had seen my good neighbor Xavier complete his task. He held a long, black, three-pronged electrical plug and cord. He studied the cord, stretching it out and seemingly measuring it in his mind. His eyes somehow hit the light in such a way that I could see them clearly. They were as dark and black as the shirt he wore. His skin appeared even more pale. For the first time, I thought I was watching a ghost.

He put the plug and cord down ever so precisely and made a mark on one of his papers. He took a good look at everything and seemed to breathe it all in. He studied his papers some more, looking at each one, and finally put them down on the kitchen counter which bordered the living room. He took another deep breath and hunched his shoulders in weariness.

My neighbor switched off his lamp, and his pale head appeared to float towards me and around the corner towards the bedroom of the dwelling. I felt the coolness of the wind sweep pass me. I turned away from the darkness of Xavier's and witnessed the darkness all around me.

The window of my apartment beckoned me, and I obliged. I had left the kitchen light on, which created a warm glow throughout. I looked straight down to see my

couch, but I was at such an angle that I saw only a small portion of its beige material. I wanted to see my hat. Although I knew it was there, the angle was too extreme to see it. It had to be there, hadn't it?

I began to feel a sense of fear that my fedora was no longer where I had left it. At that moment, I sensed it to be the most important object in the world. I jumped off the box and moved quickly. Around one corner, then another, and yet another. The doors blurred in my peripheral sight. I barely saw the number fifteen go by. And then good old five. I hastily went for my keys, which only made it worse. I dropped them, and then when I had retrieved them, my hand shook as I attempted to slide the right one into the keyhole. Finally, it went in and I heard the click of unlocking. I burst through the door and saw my brown hat resting calmly on the couch.

I felt such peace at that moment as if I were a floating spirit released from the most excruciating torture of life. I felt so light that I would fly away unless I put my hat on. A gust of wind blew from my little window and shut the door behind me. I floated to the sofa and fitted my hat onto myself.

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I don't remember sleeping, but I woke up refreshed and calm. My fedora, wrinkled and creased from sleeping in, lay on my pillow. I felt clean and in no need of a shower. I arose from bed and disrobed from the wrinkled clothes I was in. I put on crisp, clean tan trousers and a freshly pressed white shirt. I stared at myself in the bathroom mirror. I stared at my face. It looked wrinkled and worn like the clothes I had just removed. Dark stubble sprouted from my face, and my brown hair was greatly tousled. I

stared into my eyes and thought I saw life there. My eyes were pure white and irises cool brown.

I turned on the faucet and stuck my head under the water. I felt calm again, still. I felt like I was in the safety and peace of being behind a rushing waterfall. My hair became drenched. I blindly rose and searched for the towel I knew to be hanging there. I grasp the soft cotton and ran it over my hair until most of the water had been transferred to the towel.

With the beige towel in hand, I shut off the faucet. I returned the towel to the rack and then combed my hair to my liking.

I knew it was daytime, and yet I felt darkness about. The sunlight that entered my bathroom window was greatly muted, filtered somehow. All the light that did enter my place seemed an eerie mixture of yellow and grey. I stepped up and onto the edge of the tub to take a look out the little window that was above it. Huge grey clouds towered in the sky and threatened everything below with rain.

I felt like nothing could touch me. I felt light and airy as if I were a bed sheet hanging on a clothesline and moving with a soft breeze. I seemed to float to the living room and attempted to hear if anything was going on at Xavier's. I distinctly heard the faint sound of metal clanking. A smile flowed onto my face from inside of me.

I moved to the bedroom and placed my fedora on my damp head. I also grabbed my brown knapsack. It had a single strap to carry it by. It was made of canvas for durability. And I was sure it would complement my outfit perfectly. I took it to the kitchen where I fixed myself a sandwich. I put the sandwich, a banana, an apple, some chips, and a boxed juice drink into my bag.

I calmly but quickly consumed two bowls of cereal, a banana, and a glass of orange juice. I paused to think about what else I had to do before I left, all the while thinking about what might be happening at Xavier's and that I was missing it all.

I had no idea how long I would be gone. I took a paper bag and wrote my ex-girlfriend's name on it. I put her two CDs in it and placed it just outside my door; I felt confident of its safety. I was hoping not to see her. The cold air penetrated my thin white shirt, and the sky appeared as menacing as ever. I retreated and closed the door. I went to my closet and took out my raincoat and umbrella, both a balmy beige color. With my raincoat on, I felt so confident about my appearance, I wished someone had been watching *me*.

I left my building and saw little sign of life. I walked briskly around the building to my watching spot. I placed my knapsack and bumbershoot on the ground between the fence and metal box. They both stood leaning against the box. When I was certain that they wouldn't fall, I peered into my neighbor's world.

He must have been working since dawn because there was already a lot done. A metal box held a prominent position in the living room. It was almost a box. There were three sides of a box. The carpet was at the bottom, I thought, and two long metal panels and one short one made three more sides. The short panel, a square-shaped one, faced me and was parallel to my alleyway.

Two large brackets, covering the entire height of the panels, held them together with the aid of screws at two corners. Xavier wore all black again. I again pined to see his hat on his head, but his hat was nowhere. He held a drill, and I saw other tools strewn

about: a hammer, two screwdrivers, a pair of pliers, some wrenches, and other items which appeared to be tools whose names I do not know.

I watched him work. He seemed as an artist. He sculpted the metal creating different forms and shapes in it. He took out what he created leaving odd, yet wonderful, shaped holes. And then, invariably, he filled them with the other pieces and parts he had. The dials and the wires and the switches filled the empty places giving the semi-box texture.

My legs had become numb. I had been standing the same way for too long and somehow cut off the circulation from them. I managed to sit myself down and hang my legs over the edge of my metal box of whose purpose I was unsure. I dangled and moved my legs around in effort to get feeling back. I began to feel the flow of blood, and my legs began to warm. I stood up again.

Before I could even figure out what I had missed from sitting down, I felt the need to urinate. I should have foreseen this problem, but I hadn't. I would have to miss something or urinate right there in the alleyway. Being a civilized person, I wouldn't act like a common, contemptible bum. I walked briskly back to my apartment, leaving my knapsack and bumbershoot next to the metal box, my metal box.

I reached my front door and saw the brown bag of CDs still there. I realized how urgent my need to urinate was. A couple raindrops hit the ground as I danced around, unlocked the door, and hurried in. If I didn't get to the toilet in an instant, I would explode. In my haste, I ran into my television. The force with which I hit it sent it crashing down. My shoulder was instantly sore, but I managed to ignore it rather quickly.

I continued to the bathroom and relieved myself. My body relaxed, but I suddenly became enraged. I was missing the wonderful process of creation that my neighbor had embarked on. My TV lay face down on the floor. My ex-girlfriend was superficial and materialistic; and she refused to even know who I was.

I found myself in my living room with my fists clenched. I kicked my fallen television, then lifted it up to see the damage. The screen was cracked, and I let go of my rage. I grabbed the broom that was nearby in the kitchen. I held it where the whiskers were, I held it like a bat. I swung away, obliterating my TV with all my might. When the broomstick seemed as if it would do no more damage, I began kicking at the screen. I kicked as if it were attacking me, as if it were a rabid dog at my heels. I hit the TV with my fists and picked it up and threw it down more than once.

I had exhausted myself. I moved backwards and landed on my couch. I stared at the rubble in front of me and felt like I was dreaming. The destroyed TV took different forms in my mind: a horrible beast that could never really die, a fire that wouldn't go out, a perversion of the wonderful machine my neighbor was building.

He was building a machine, I was sure, the beauty of which was something wonderful. I had to get back. I looked at the TV again and saw only a wrecked TV. I heard the rain pounding outside and thought of my bumbershoot and bag getting wet. I left and locked the door behind me. The eave over my front door kept my ex's brown bag dry for whatever it was worth.

As I locked the door, I noticed my knuckles were bloodied. I winced at the sudden realization of pain. My left shoulder ached as well. I stepped out in the rain and stood in one place as I cleaned my hands. The blood washed away to reveal patches of

raw skin. The pain moved up my arms, but I knew it would be temporary. I sauntered through the rain back to my vantage point. My hat and coat protected me from the elements.

I stood on my box taking care to firmly plant my feet and balance myself, so that I wouldn't slip. I held my umbrella in my right hand and looked in. What my neighbor was building caused me to open my mouth in awe. It was a machine, still in progress, but taking the form of something ethereal. The textures, the shapes, the reflections, they all meshed together into something captivating and not of this world.

Xavier worked inside the three-walled box. I couldn't perceive his exact actions, but it seemed that all of the dials, buttons, and lights that were inserted into the panels and visible from the outside were being connected by my good neighbor on the inside. Every so often, I caught a glimpse of some wires or some small pipes that Xavier was manipulating.

My arm was aching from holding my beige umbrella. I put it down by my side and looked up at the rain that was falling. Two eaves were above me—one from Xavier's building and one from mine. Adding that to my hat and coat, I realized the umbrella was borderline superfluous. I would be dry enough without it. I left it open and put it over my bag, which was looking quite damp.

Looking at the bag, I realized my hunger. I ignored it for a moment and looked back in the window. I could see Xavier's face quite clearly. Why weren't his eyes pink? That and not being able to see his hat irked me. Although I was marveling at his creation, my neighbor appeared to me as incomplete. He needed his hat. And his nearly black irises betrayed the good person I knew him to be.

How long had he been working? How long had he been planning this? And exactly what was it that he was building? It was a machine of some sort, but what was its purpose? How come it was arousing emotions in me that no machine ever had? Maybe it wasn't a machine. Maybe it was a work of art.

I had all these thoughts and questions, and the item in question wasn't even complete. I heard a noise that wasn't rain and knew it was my stomach. Would Xavier take a lunch? I took mine. I held onto my sandwich with one hand and with my other hand held onto the window sill. The window was open at its slight angle. Perhaps he was so engaged in his work that he didn't know it was open. Or maybe with all his work he was hot and needed a cool breeze.

I looked behind me and saw my window was open as well. I smiled and ate my lunch. The sound of rain added to my comfort. Xavier stood up now in the center of his creation. He looked weary, was hunched over and breathing hard. As he stepped out from his position, I slunk back so not to be seen. I heard various watery sounds from his bathroom, which I did my best to ignore. I didn't want to intrude. I took another peak and saw him in the kitchen digging through the refrigerator.

I stepped off my metal box and stood with my back against the wall of Xavier's building. I finished off my lunch watching the rain fall in front of me. My back was sore and my knuckles still irritated me ever so slightly, but inside I was satisfied. I laughed looking at the rain. I thought about what kind of treasures might be in my mailbox today and then realized it was Sunday and nothing would be there. I laughed even more.

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It was evening. I had no idea what time. No matter how stylish watches can be, I detested wearing one. A pocket watch can be very classy, but the one I had had broke, and I hadn't yet found a trustworthy repair shop nor had the motivation to go get it fixed. It would just break again.

Xavier worked more slowly than he had during the day. He seemed to have been double checking his earlier work and fine tuning the screws, wires, and other little bits that he found unsatisfactory. I studied the appearance of the machine more than I watched my neighbor fiddle with everything. All of the round dials and meters, a small black tube, the circular and teardrop lights gave the machine a softness. They seemed to take away from the harshness of the metal and strict corners of the contraption. Even though I did not know what it was, I knew it was incomplete. It needed its top, just as Xavier needed his hat.

My neighbor stepped out from the middle of the machine again. He headed towards the door. I listened through all the drips and drops of the rain, straining to hear the sound of his door opening and closing. It didn't. I heard something else: the sound of a drill. Xavier was still working. It was just that, for now, it was beyond my sight.

I glanced to my right—where the little fence was—and saw a vermilion umbrella floating by. It was the unmistakable possession of my ex. Only she had the gall to have an umbrella of such a bright red color. She always had to be noticed. I certainly had noticed her and wished I had averted myself from such an obvious come-on by an obvious person.

In my mind, I saw her bend over to pick up the paper bag. She would knock on the door just the same. If I were there, she would want me to know of her presence. I

wondered what she would think of the TV that lay in shambles. I was glad she wouldn't notice me where I was. I was happy and felt justified that she wouldn't be able to see what I saw. A person who always wanted attention would never notice something that truly deserved attention. I wondered if she had ever truly noticed me. I doubted it.

The vermilion material floated by again, this time going the other way. I felt a dash of regret that I would never see it or her again. As superficial and arrogant as she was, she did generate some happiness for me—a false happiness it was true, but genuine joy is so difficult to come by that the counterfeit sufficed when I had needed it to.

I turned back to the window feeling weary for the first time that day. I could feel myself breathing, and I leaned against the wall. I heard the sounds of the drill and grew even wearier. I felt I could use a nap. Since I couldn't see, I sat down where I was. My eyelids felt like weights. I placed my hat to cover my face and felt the seat of my pants soak up the rain water that had stayed on top of my metal box. Darkness was here. No orange sun, no yellow moon, no red umbrella.

The many lights of the apartment complex couldn't penetrate my hat, or the alleyway for that matter. I drifted to a place of shapes and colors: blues, silvers, jagged edges, stars, triangles. I saw stars before my eyes. Spirals sucked them up into oblivion. And then waves of blues and greens covered up those.

The slam of the window above woke me. I looked up to see it closed for the first time since my wind-blown hat had led me to this spot. I stood up and looked in. The light was off making it hard to see. I could make out the shape of my neighbor's metal box, but couldn't tell if it had been altered since I had last taken my eyes off of it.

I picked up my knapsack and bumbershoot and went on my way. I thought about what I would tell my work, my boss. I wasn't going in the next day. Even though I was the only one in my department, a manager from the front office was considered my boss. He never came by to say 'hi' or even to learn about the department he was 'in charge of'. Still, I would call in sick the next day and the message I would leave would be for him and his thick bushy mustache. Either he or some other poor sap who had no idea what he was doing would work in shipping-and-receiving in my stead. And then when I did come back, I would find everything in a ruined and confused state that is hard to believe could be produced in less than a day's time. If I did go to work on Tuesday, that's exactly what I would find.

Walking through the rain with my umbrella open and above my head, I thought I would tell my work I had been out in the rain too long and had caught a terrible cold. Not that my excuse really mattered, but I like to keep everything plausible. All those ungrateful people only noticed when I was not there, never when I was.

I reached my front door. The brown paper bag was gone, but there was nothing in its place. No note saying she had been here. No card wishing me farewell. I thought it odd that she left nothing physical to let me know she had been here. Maybe the absence of the bag was enough.

I went in and locked the door behind me. It was late enough that the graveyard shift would be working, so I called in sick to work leaving a message for the boss. I was careful to avoid the wreckage in the living room as I went to the rear of my apartment.

I stripped, took a shower, and fell asleep naked in bed to the sound of falling rain.

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The rain continued to pound outside my window as I woke up. I had no idea what time it was and cursed the absence of a clock within my sight. Of course, I did have a clock; I couldn't awake for work without one. I just didn't know where it was at the moment.

I moved to the edge of the bed thinking about where it was and trying to remember the dream that I had just had, but which was fading into the unconscious. I couldn't for the life of me pull it back. It had something to do with . . . but I couldn't remember.

I looked down at my naked body. The skin seemed a little loose, wrinkled, and aged, but I knew my body was strong underneath. It had to be if only from my occupation. One doesn't become weak from lifting and moving boxes all day. I pinched some of the excess skin and wondered what it was made of and wondered why it was as it was. What was flesh and what was its essence? It can be touched and felt, but it was all so temporary. But my mind, my spirit—I wasn't thinking straight.

I stood up and saw the clock on the floor. It lay next to the nightstand, obviously having been knocked over by myself although I didn't remember doing such a thing. The rain poured down, and I felt like I should take another shower.

I made the water hot. It felt like I was going to melt. And I thought that wouldn't be such a bad thing. When I felt the water beginning to cool down, I shut it off. I was dripping and steam left my body rising in the air.

I dried and dressed, all the usual motions. My clothes were similar to the ones I wore the day before: mostly light brown with touches of white. I stepped through the shattered pieces of glass, plastic, metal, and whatever else that was used to make up my

TV. I made a lunch, grabbed my coat and umbrella, and left for the day. My hat and coat were on, and yet I opened my umbrella if only for the short walk.

I walked up to my box and saw Xavier's window open. Fortunate for me, he must have called in sick as well. I could hear activity from within. I placed my knapsack down, which held my lunch, and put my open umbrella over it to keep it dry. I stood on top of the box and peered in.

Once again Xavier was out of my view, but I heard something going on. The rain fell lightly, and a small smile hung on my face. I looked at my reflection in the partially opened window. It was light and hard to see, but when I saw a clear picture of myself, I smiled even more.

I once again looked at the brackets and screws of the window and knew they'd be easy to disassemble. Entrance into Xavier's apartment would be simple if the need ever arose. I made a mental note to double check if I had the correct size and type screwdriver at home.

I studied the machine, trying to decipher it and make sense of it. I was hardly mechanically inclined, so I would be hard pressed to describe each part and discern its purpose. For me, however, the machine was almost complete. It still lacked its top, which I assumed my neighbor was working on.

The machine still gave me a sense of beauty. What purpose could this heavenly machine have? I still couldn't guess. Xavier moved back into the picture. He held the top panel which he had been working on. I could see what appeared to be fluorescent tubes line and cover the panel. Various other connectors and wires remained loose.

He moved the panel with care and a sense of strain. His brow wrinkled as he hoisted it on top of the semi-box. The side with the fluorescent tubes and loose ends went downward and inside my neighbor's metal box. The breadth of the panel allowed it to sit comfortably on top while Xavier secured it by other means.

He used two long metal brackets that approached the entire length of the machine. When his work was done on the outside, he climbed in, I assumed, to secure all the loose ends. The top of the machine had a few small lights and a few other protrusions on it, but it wasn't nearly as decorated as the side panels. What was the purpose of this magnificent machine? It was bugging bloody hell out of me.

Light rain fell and I thought of the possibilities that would be worthy of such a beautiful contraption. I thought about rain and the floating of mist and steam. Maybe it was a machine that could turn a human into mist. One could float around like a cloud, enter places through crevices, and rarely be detected.

Or even more, perhaps the machine could turn flesh into spirit. I looked at my hands, how they were shriveled from all the moisture. My prune-like hands, of course, being flesh, were temporary. But maybe there was another state, a more permanent state and instead of being stone, it was spirit. A spirit machine began to sound wonderful to me. I could exist on another level. My understanding of things unseen would become full. And the pains and temptations of the flesh would no longer have hold over me. I wanted to be spirit; I wanted that existence. I felt my insides well up with hope as I looked on.

And then I had another thought. What if the machine were a device for communicating with a lost God—the God that had been buried by false religions and

thoughts and teachings. Perhaps the machine could find Him who had been neglected and put aside for centuries and millennia. My neighbor had been searching, too, and designed and built the machine as a last attempt to transport him to a realm where he could see and know God clearly and intimately.

I did not know which hypothesis, if any, was correct. Xavier climbed out of the machine and wiped the sweat from his brow. He stood over his machine and looked over it with his dark eyes. He didn't show his teeth when he smiled. Instead, his thin lips stretched and then almost disappeared in his mouth. It was almost a sinister smile he wore then, different from other smiles I had witnessed on my neighbor. My good neighbor had no malice in him, I was sure. How could someone I connected with so well have any thing but good in him?

Xavier's hunched over body looked tired, but his eyes showed me happiness and even wonderment. He was fulfilling his dream, his plan, his design. His dark eyes looked toward the ceiling and then toward the door. I bent down, sensing he was about to leave. I heard him walk close to the window and then to the bathroom. I heard the tinkle, the flushing, and the washing.

Xavier then moved toward the front door, and I heard the slam as he left. I ducked down between my metal box and the little fence. I had to push my umbrella and knapsack out of the way. I peeked over the box waiting to see if Xavier would walk by. He did.

And at the moment he did pass by in his dark raincoat and dark hat, he looked down my little alleyway. He couldn't have seen me, I assure you. And yet, he looked right at me. Right through me would be more precise. With the rain falling down, I had

seen his dark eyes pierce right through me as if I weren't even there. I remained crouching while I thought about where my neighbor was heading. I cautiously arose and grabbed my umbrella and knapsack. I stepped onto the box and then jumped down making a tiny splash in the water. I walked straight ahead and took a left instead of a right. Maybe my neighbor was only getting his mail.

I didn't see him at the wall of mailboxes. Where was he? I opened my small metal mailbox and saw a few items inside. Just then, out of the manager's office, stepped Xavier. He ignored me completely this time. He went to the parking lot, apparently heading towards his car.

I put the contents of my mailbox into my breast pocket inside my coat. I went back to my apartment, sat on the couch, and carefully listened for Xavier's return while I went through my mail. A few advertisements and a letter lay on my coffee table.

The letter was from an old friend whom I hadn't seen in years. We had gone to the same high school way back when, but our different universities brought us to different parts of the country and different events in our lives. I considered her a good friend and wrote her often.

Her letter was disquieting. After reading how she was making so much money but it not being enough and how she was shacking up with this guy who was probably a jerk and how she claimed to be none-the-less happy, I knew that me and my old friend no longer shared much of anything. The ink with which she wrote was light and difficult to read—it seemed that the pen she had used was old and needed to be replaced. I compared the date of the letter and the postmark and noted the discrepancy; she had waited at least a week to have mailed the letter. It wasn't that I felt I deserved an express

letter, but I was rather disappointed a letter she had composed to me seemed so unimportant that she had waited a week to send it.

I put the letter back on the coffee table leaving it apart from the envelope. I riffled through the junk mail and listened to the rain. I looked at my shattered, broken TV in front of me and thought I'd wait just one more day to clean it up. My shoulder was no longer sore. The skin on my knuckles was healed. Physically, I was quite well, but my friend's letter left me feeling down. I wished for my TV to be in a proper state so that I could melt on my couch and lose myself to what was on the screen.

I thought about what I had been doing for the past few days. I thought about my good neighbor Xavier. He stood for something; he had dreams beyond the material and the fleeting.

I listened for him. I could barely make out the rain. Perhaps, it was near its end. I looked up at my little window and saw darkness. It was nighttime and overcast, not that looking out my window told me that. I just knew. I didn't know, however, how long Xavier had been gone. I didn't even know how late it was because I couldn't find a clock.

The air in my apartment felt stale. I only had the one window open. There were others throughout the place, but I felt like I couldn't leave the couch. It was like I was stuck in a tar pit, my life sinking away. I thought about my life, my job, my relationships, and lack of relationships. My face fell to the palms of my hands; I was underwhelmed.

My hat and coat remained on. I wondered if I had drifted off at all. Sleep was kind. I wanted to lose myself. Lose my body.

The sharp sound of Xavier's door slamming penetrated my ears. I felt a surge of energy enter my body and stood up. My apartment was dark, but I knew it well and navigated around the coffee table and to the door. I ran to my metal box, my viewing point.

The only light that was in Xavier's living room and kitchen came from the numerous lights from outside. Eerie shadows and distorted light filled the space. I saw no Xavier. But I heard the rushing water coming from the shower. He must be there, cleaning himself, preparing himself. I waited to see for what.

He entered the room, but left the lights off. He wore all white—white trousers that tied in front and looked like they were for the beach and a white buttoned shirt, which reminded me of my own. No socks, no jewelry, no hat. The white material combined with his pale skin made him look sick and weak and more like a ghost than ever.

He flipped a few switches that brought the machine humming and glowing to life. I did my best to remember which switches he flipped and which direction he flipped them. I began to wonder if the order of how they were flipped mattered, but my attention was drawn to all the other dials he moved and instruments he consulted. Some of this activity was on the other side of the machine which I could not see.

The machine made a warm humming noise. All the little lights that populated the surface of the machine either stayed lit or blinked. The lights themselves did little to light the room. And then a warm blue glow emanated from the side of the machine where I knew no panel to be, just an opening the size of the smaller panel which was parallel to my little alleyway.

Xavier stepped to where the opening was and took on the blue glow that came out of it. He clapped his hands together and brought them to his chest as in prayer or meditation. He breathed deeply as I held my own breath.

My good neighbor went down to his knees. I watched his head get lower and lower until he disappeared entirely into the machine. I heard a soft rattling sound as the warm blue glow went away. The machine continued its hum and the little lights remained as they were, either steadily on or blinking on and off. It was like this for some time, maybe a half hour.

Then the machine shut off. The lights went black. The hum silenced.

I stayed watching for three hours. Xavier never came out.

\* \* \*

I called in sick one more day to see what would happen. There was no sound or activity from my neighbor's place. I grew bored and tired and wondered if the rain would come back.

On Wednesday, I went back to work. Everything was a mess, but I didn't really care. I ignored just about everyone who talked to me. I was mechanical, only fulfilling my duties, floating without thinking. My body performed the tasks, but the rest of me was somewhere else.

That night I went to my alleyway with a screwdriver. The night was crisp and cool, but I had gone without a coat or jacket. I wore pants of the lightest beige color I could find and a white shirt. Of course, I had my brown fedora. Lights from the apartment complex filled Xavier's apartment with those odd lights and shadows I had seen the other evening. The machine lay there dormant.

There were only two screws to remove to get inside. I tried one, and it didn't budge. I tried again. I strained my muscles until it felt like they were going to burst out of my skin. As soon as I thought I would have to break the window or find a power screwdriver, the screw turned. After the initial turn, it was easy. I removed the first screw. The second one was much easier. Once both screws were out, the window swung on its hinge all the way inside the apartment until it rested against the wall.

I wasn't sure what to do with the screwdriver. I felt I shouldn't leave it outside to be discovered, seen, or tripped over, so I threw it into Xavier's place where it landed softly on the carpet.

I wanted to go in the window feet first, which proved to be a difficult and complicated maneuver. I essentially dove in, losing my hat along the way. Unbelievable to me, I landed without causing much noise or pain.

Up until then, the night had been calm. As I stood up from my spill, I heard the wind begin to stir outside. I picked up my hat to put it on, but all of a sudden it felt wrong. It felt impure somehow, so I placed it on the kitchen counter. I did the same with the screwdriver.

The air in the apartment was cold and stale. My attention was fixed on the machine. It was silent, but there was noise all around me—from the outside, from the wind. I heard the banging of a tree branch against a window. I heard leaves rustle outside. I heard the noise of the windows shaking in efforts to resist the force of the wind. The machine was silent like a coffin. Shadows lay over it.

I gently ran my fingers over the top of the machine. The wind outside was fierce, and the shadows moved. I looked up and against the wall was the silhouette of a tall

person in a fedora. I jumped back instantly. I jumped back into Xavier's television set causing it to fall off the cart and crash to the floor.

My eyes went back to the silhouette. I saw the source: Xavier's hat atop a coat rack. I let out a long sigh and asked myself why I was so jumpy. I told myself I was on the verge of a great discovery. I was going to enter a place only one man had previously gone.

That is, if I could get it to work. Perhaps, I would experience nothing but a dead metal box.

I examined the other side of the machine—the side that I couldn't see from the window. It was quite similar to the other long panel. There were switches, dials, and the like. I backed up and looked at the machine as a whole. It was a thing of beauty: silver, soft, and sharp.

I looked into the opening where Xavier had entered. I saw nothing but blackness inside. Where had he gone? Was he still there? The wind banged against the window. I went to the side of the machine I knew best. I recreated in my mind, as best I could, the sequence in which Xavier had turned the machine on. I flipped all the switches how I remembered them to be because I noticed that they had been set back to their original positions. Maybe the machine had reset itself. As I flipped switches, the machine began to come to life. A hum started, lights went on, and hands of dials moved.

I went to the other side and did my best to configure the switches in a similar way. Everything appeared to be fine, but I had no way of knowing.

I stepped to where I saw Xavier that last time. I looked across the room to see my hat lying next to the screwdriver on the counter. It looked so silly to me. How could a

hat have become so important to me? I looked down. The soft blue light emanating from the machine made me glow just as it had made Xavier glow. I peered inside and saw nothing. I knew the light was coming from inside, but I couldn't see the source. I could make out the other side of the machine and the two sides to my left and right, but I did not see where the wires were connected or where a pipe might be. I only saw smooth walls. Except for the light, it was a hollow machine.

I stood up and clapped my hands like I had seen Xavier do a few nights ago. I clapped my hands and held them to my chest not out of imitation, but out of instinct. I wanted to have a thought or a meditation or a prayer, but nothing came to mind. My mind went blank. Like a white sheet, there was nothing there. I went into the machine feet first as I pictured Xavier to have done. As I went in, I felt my body disappear into the light. I would like to think that I slid my body into the machine under my own power, but it felt more like I was sinking into it.

As I felt my whole self in, I heard the soft rattling sound I had heard when Xavier had entered the machine. I knew the machine was closing. I wondered if my experience would be the same as my neighbor's. I could have easily got the configuration of the switches wrong. The thought passed from my mind.

I was in the blue light. I couldn't tell what was at my back; I felt like I was floating. There was warmth. It was soothing. I realized my eyes to be closed. I told my mind to open them, but it wouldn't obey. My hands and arms also refused to move. I breathed deeply, relaxed, and floated until my eyes became open. I didn't feel my eyelids open. On the contrary, I felt as if they had dematerialized. I was seeing but not in the normal way.

I saw myself, my life. I was looking into a mirror of the soul. The images I saw weren't flesh; they were spirit. I could see through them. I could see all of them. I saw myself, my life.

I was a wretch. I was secluded from everyone else. I saw my fear. I hadn't even said good-bye to my ex. She had come and gone like so many others, not seeing me. I looked for her floating around now. I saw nothing. I saw strangers, bums I refused to give money to; they all could have been me.

I was floating in the blue glow. My fear, anger, and failings were before me. They took the form of blacks and reds of tar and blood. They swirled and spiraled. They were swallowed up by the blue light. My failure to have a proper farewell and to close the chapter I had with my ex. My failure to communicate my beliefs and desire for close friendships. My superficial friend who wrote about her life of going through the motions and my failing to get through to her. Or even go see her. My failure to see or even acknowledge those who worked with me.

My own superficiality stared right at me with hollow eyes. I was just a body, just a machine. I had failed to act, to fulfill. I saw another figure.

I saw someone from my past, someone who loved me, someone who truly loved me. I had failed her as I had everyone else. I hadn't appreciated her. There were moments I had, but those had been fleeting. I had allowed those moments to be drowned with a flood of trivial desires, cares, and selfishness. I once had what was true, what would show me a reflection of God. I had tossed it aside and looked into things which showed me everything but God. I was weak. I was hollow when hallow was what I wanted to be.

My face was wet and I looked down to see myself clothed in black. Where were my light colored clothes? This was the real me. The glow continued and I couldn't move. My face was damp. How did I get out of this thing? How could I break free? I needed to break free. I struggled. I tensed and flexed with determination. I would find that true love. I would find that reflection of God.

I felt myself floating up. I felt myself become loosed.

I was changed. I would escape the machine. I would become spirit after all.