

# My Fucking Family

by

## Brett Paufler

This is a work of fiction.

*No, it's not.*

*Yes, it is.*

*How do you know?*

*Because it actually happened.*

*My point exactly.*

I repeat: this is a work of fiction. If any of this seems to be based upon reality or the characters seem sort of real or like someone you think you might know, then you are crazier than I am. And just in case you are wondering, the voices, the voices in my head, these are the *family* in question.

*So, is he a son?*

*Or a brother?*

*Why not both?*

*Are you saying the son of a brother?*

*Or brother of a son?*

*Gets tricky, if you ask me.*

*Maybe he's the son of a brother of a brother's son.*

*I think my head's going to explode.*

*Hit the deck!*

*Incoming!*

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Strange milestones for a story that will never be finished.

A work of fiction.  
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# # #

Rule #1: When in doubt, start with an enumerated list.  
It adds a sense of authority.

# # #

Rule #17a (*The Corollary to Rule Number One*): It  
never hurts to pad your numbers.

# # #

Rule #3: Always keep them guessing.

# # #

Rule #37: Quit while you're ahead.

# # #

*So, we're in agreement? We're going to whack him?  
We're not going to whack him.  
And we haven't been in agreement on anything in over  
a thousand years.*

*Pizza.*

*What?*

*Pizza.*

*I know what you said.*

*Then why are you asking?*  
*He's asking because you're being unclear. Besides,*  
*we didn't all agree on pizza.*  
*I did.*  
*I'd rather of had a hamburger.*  
*But you ate the pizza.*  
*Still, a hamburger would have been better.*  
*We can have that tonight?*  
*I thought we were getting tacos?*  
*Yep. Right after we whack him.*  
*We're not going to whack him.*  
*Whatever. I'm getting a gun just in case.*  
*Oh, me too...*

###

Rule #*I Forget*: Don't bring a knife to a gunfight.

###

The *Pearl Handled Colt 45* (was there ever such a weapon) with silver plated barrel (sounds impractical without the matching sterling silver bullets if you ask me) engraved filigree (I had to look that one up) shooting an impressive six rounds (I didn't have to look this one up) with a barrel three inches longer than it's forerunners (so, clearly, the basis of marketing hasn't changed for the past hundred years) giving it a lethal range of fifty meters (like anyone knows how far a meter is) from a shot grouping (think scatter plot) of under two meters (even I know this sucks *turd-balls*) giving it a base 0.95 chance (I'm making

all of this up, so I could be off by a few percentage points) of killing someone at maximum range (six shots times a two meter spread at fifty meters means the silly thing misses it's mark most of the time; and as such) is not my weapon of choice (least of all, if my life were to depend upon the outcome of said firefight).

###

Now, the laser sighted variant that shoots exploding plasma rounds (not sure what that one is called), well, that's an entirely different story... and the one I will be telling forthwith.

###

*Plasma Guns* don't run out of ammunition. I mean, they do run out of ammunition; but by the time they do, their owners are usually dead (and not from old age).

Thankfully, there is a warning period, during which, an enterprising owner of a *Plasma Gun* may kill a (presumably) less enterprising owner of a *Plasma Gun* and thereby keep the *Circle of Death* going strong.

###

Can you see the plasma bolts flying through the air? The street is silly with the stupid things (and on this, you're just going to have to trust me, plasma bolts are indeed stone cold stupid, which is a strange way to describe something

hotter than a sun going supernova, but about the best way to describe said stellar object after it becomes a black hole).

###

Anyhow, plasma bolts: don't be counting on their discriminatory ability. Hmm, maybe this should have had a number.

###

Rule #Zed: Not every rule has a number.

###

*The Corollary to Rule #Zed:* Not every number has a rule; at least, not at your Security Clearance.

###

I'm sorry. I seem to have become distracted. Plasma bolts fill the air. It's your standard city street, which normally would tell you nothing, but as we are presently in the Capital (I mean, are we not presently in the Capital), I would hope that it tells you everything.

Especially after one considers that plasma bolts do not (as a rule, enumerated or otherwise) tend to fill the city streets of our fair city. Still, at the moment in question, they did and/or do.

###

Steve is the quarry.

Policemen (and not women, as I can only assume they would be much better shots, certainly their barbs sting and hit home all the more often when they) are the hunters.

Anyhow, like I said (and seriously, I do not like repeating myself, so heads up and pay attention), bolts of plasma fill the air (which means they neither fill Steve, the policemen, nor innocent stander-bys).

# # #

Steve ducks into an alley.

A bolt chews through the corner of the building right next to where he is standing.

Steve jumps back.

Another bolt (this one not much of a chewer opts to) cut through the wall just about eye level, inches in front of Steve's face.

Rather than jumping back this time, Steve opts (because if a stupid bolt can change it up, so can he) to look through the hole, check out the cute girl behind the desk inside the office building, who is doing whatever it is that cute girls behind desks inside office buildings in the Capital do (I guess looking cute, mostly), before quickly ducking back down to safety (or the relative safety, which basically means none, behind the part of the wall that is still intact, fat lot of good that apparently does against bolts), as another one the sizzling bolts comes whizzing through the same hole as before.

Clearly, someone is using a brace. This means a sharpshooter; and judging by the angle, not one of the policemen on the ground (or maybe we can all recognize the disparity between a policeman and a sharpshooter and leave it at that).

Still, a girl is a girl and (a boy is a boy and) Steve is, well, pretty much Steve, so he looks back up through the hole, smiles, winks at the girl, and ducks back down just in time as another bolt comes flying on through (the same hole as before).

This continues for a while.

Her name is Cynthia.

She is an intern.

She would much rather be an Antiquarian,

But, alas, there are bills to pay.

One must imagine that this conversation takes place between bolts of plasma flying through the air (entering one corner of the building, existing the other, hissing through the air as they go, the edges of the holes involved growing ever brighter) and that the pair of them (Cynthia and Steve) seem to be rather nonchalant about this entire process, as if this was a daily part of their lives.

Sadly, when Steve asks Cynthia if she likes Italian food, she replies in the affirmative; and so, he never requests her phone number.

###

Since it's highly unlikely the entire reading public has the appropriate Security Clearance, Steve's reluctance to go

on a date with a woman willing to subsist on a high carbohydrate diet will never be fully explained.

###

Rule #47: Call their Security Clearance into question.

###

Besides, he's leaving town on the very next train.

###

Rule #48: Change the subject.

###

Steve fires a few rounds of his Plasma Gun from one hole through the other on the thought that maybe he could hit the sniper that way.

This doesn't work.

###

Then, suddenly remembering the policemen, Steve fires a few rounds around the corner at them, as well.

But this doesn't do much good (or harm) either.

###



Then, in a true moment of inspiration, Steve comes up with a really brilliant plan, puts his plasma gun on auto-fire, wedges said weapon into the sizzling hole in the wall (so, sort of shooting back at the sniper), before running down the alley as quickly as he can to avoid the forthcoming explosion when bolt hits beam (or in other words, as if his life depended upon it).

###

There is an explosion.

###

Sadly, Cynthia will playing no further role in this tale of love and adventure.

###

Rule #52: What your mother told you is true.

###

Carbs Kill!

###

As Steve runs up the stairs onto the train platform, the Mono Rail toots its whistle (sissy little futuristic thing).

Steve jumps the turnstile just as the Bullet Train slowly begins to leave the station (which, just between you

and me, is exactly not the sort of behavior one expects out of something named after a speeding bullet).

As Steve reaches the rear of the train (and is it just me or is Steve really in shape) the blessed thing turns into one of those Local Commuter Specials (you know, the annoying ones that stop every five minutes at every Podunk town if only to drop off the mail and pick up the milk).

So, Steve waits until the rear car turns into a fancy red caboose (newly painted with shiny brass trim), the engine at the front gives off a cheerful blast of steam (so, clearly a steam engine, but a late century model so there need be no fear of either Indians or a breakdown), and a smiling brakeman (cheerful bastard), who opens the back door, as he rings a brass bell (so, maybe there is a prize involved) and yells, 'All aboard!'

At which point, Steve accents and does indeed jump on board, brushes off his jacket (diner, casual), and reaches into his pocket to tip the man.

###

"My luggage?"

"But of course, sir?" as a small stack (I guess the term is relative) of traveling cases (so, plural, and just in case you're wondering -- god I love puns -- you've got -- or that is to say, Steve has got -- his toilet, a brief -- and/or briefcase -- two mains, and a foot locker, so really, he's traveling quite lightly as there is neither stand-up nor wardrobe amongst the lot) that appear at the feet of the brakeman, who suddenly turns into a conductor.

"And a private car?"

“It goes without saying, sir,” but really, it never does, so as always, it is best to ask.

###

Rule #*The Important One*: Ask and ye shall receive.

###

Before the train rounds the bend (and being a gentleman), Steve takes off his hat and waves in salute to the mounted posse, which even now is disappearing fast into the distance: their horses being no match for the mighty speed of these new hi-tech steam locomotives, while their Winchesters (the latest and greatest in killing machines) are long out of range.

###

“Friends of yours, sir?”  
“I’d really never considered.”  
“As you wish, sir?”  
“Really?”

###

Rule #*That Other One*: Sometimes it’s best not to ask.

###

*But he asked!*

*He was just being polite.  
Doesn't matter.  
Never matters.  
Certainly doesn't matter to me.  
See, it's the principle.  
What principle?  
The principle of the thing.  
What thing?  
The thing he was asking about.*

*###*

*So, we are agreed?  
He must polish our shoes.  
But we won't use the conductor as a footstool.  
Assuming diner goes well.  
Yeah, diner is the test.  
There's going to be a test?  
I didn't know there was going to be a test.  
What did I just say?  
Sorry, wasn't listening.  
Me either.  
Oh, look! Mints on the pillow!  
Is that part of the test?*

*###*

Steve looks out the window. He sees purple mountains rising majestically in the background; while in the foreground, a desolate rock strewn desert stretches as

far as the eye can see. The sun is setting. There are clouds in the sky. It is nothing short of breathtakingly beautiful.

Steve yawns. He may have quite literally seen it all before.

While halfheartedly thinking about adding '*There is nothing new under the sun*' and/or '*It's all been done before*' to his notebook, he reaches into his jacket pocket only to discover that his notebook isn't there.

Nothing is there.

This doesn't surprise Steve as much as one might expect (though, why anyone would be surprised by anything after watching a monorail transform into a bullet train, then a commuter special, before finally deciding to settle down as a steam locomotive is quite beyond me, but no matter).

Steve takes off his hat: a nice bowler. By the time it hits the rack (or more accurately the hook thereon, it being a perfect shot, if I do say so myself), the hat has turned into a worn black leather duster of the type typically worn by the *Bad Guy* in your cheesier westerns.

###

This isn't one of your cheesier westerns.

###

Steve is not a *Good Guy*.

Steve is not a *Bad Guy*.

In fact, it might be a little difficult to explain exactly what sort of *Guy* Steve actually is.

# # #

*I thought he was one of us.  
Yeah, that seems pretty simple.  
Straightforward.  
Not hard at all.  
So, what's so difficult about that?  
The fact that he is not one of us.  
But I thought he was.  
Yeah, was...*

# # #

*I don't think that's clear.  
Well, I don't think it's clear why you're still unclear  
about that.  
Well, I don't think it's clear why you think he's being  
unclear as to why he's still unclear about all that.  
I just try not to think.*

# # #

Rule #2,458: Room service, generally speaking, kicks  
ass.

# # #

Rule #2,459: Fucking hell, but does room service suck  
sometimes.

# # #

At some point, there is the desire for plot and movement in a story. But we are not at that point... not yet.

# # #

Room service sounds like a good idea.  
Steve thinks about whistling.  
Steve thinks about snapping his fingers.  
And Steve thinks about ringing the silver bell sitting on the side table, presumably placed there by the porter (is he a porter) just for this very purpose.  
And then, Steve decides to forgo the help, walks about the room, and has a looksie.

# # #

It's a nice room... if you're into that garish red-velvet polished-wood upholstered-leather sort of motif, which I am, so seriously, fuck Steve and his raised eyebrows.

# # #

Fresh flowers peek from a vase on the bar, bottles of exotic liquors line the wall, glass covered cabinets contain luxuries from the furthest corners of the known worlds, but Steve is looking for something new.

# # #

Steve is always looking for something new: that would pretty much be Steve's job... you know, if Steve had a job.

###

Steve's a bit of a bum.

Steve's a bit of a lush.

So, it should be no surprise when Steve grabs a bottle (at random) from the wall, something as yet unopened, and tries to uncork it with his mouth.

This proves more difficult than Steve expects, as he only manages to bite off the end of the cork. Luckily, after rummaging around, Steve finds a corkscrew; but after a few minutes, Steve only manages to break the cork up and push it deeper into the bottle.

Steve doesn't have time for this.

He grabs another bottle off the wall. Yes, one of the unopened ones. Please, he has standards. He has taste. And let's not forget about those all-important appearances, which need to be maintained. So, rather than trying to open this bottle, he places it on the bar (next to the flowers), along with a box of... well, whatever the fuck this is.

###

Upon the sound of the bell, the porter, bellhop, guy, dude, or whatever the fuck he is now comes scurrying back into the room.

The man is fast, but unhurried.

The man is measured, but elegant.



The man, the servant, the hired help, opens the bottle, grabs a crystalline goblet, wipes it with a square of newly pressed white linen even though it is clear the goblet, call it a snifter, needs no such treatment, before he fills said vessel a quarter of the way (no more, no less) with a bright, clear, amber colored liquid that sparkles with life (and which, to Steve, is a thousand times more interesting than the colorful sky or the setting sun).

The man places the refreshment on the table beside Steve.

The man goes to work on the box: a box which contains herbs... and spices... and rolling papers, which are taken out one by one, each carefully handled by the server, as he sets them on the wet bar, before picking each of them up again in turn, as he taps out a measured quantity of this and a measured quantity of that into a waiting square of textured paper, which he holds in hand; and when all is ready, he rolls said square of paper delight into a perfectly round tube with seemingly well-practiced ease, licking the ends together to keep it tight (not that I'm sure how this works, exactly), before setting the final mysterious cylinder (which I believe we all recognize as a cigarette) down on the table next to the snifter, along with a single (solitary) strike-anywhere blue-tip match.

###

My word, but I want one of those.

###

Rule #*Too True*: It is good to want things.

###

“Will there be anything else, sir?”

“Is it any good?”

“Sir, that is not for me to say... but it has found it’s way into this room,” this suite, so clearly, it has been vetted by someone, somewhere (or you can bet, heads will roll).

###

*Oh, I like those!*

*What?*

*The cigarette?*

*I’m pretty sure he meant the wine!*

*It’s not wine.*

*It’s an aperitif.*

*Isn’t that the same thing?*

###

But it’s never the same thing: that’s the entire point.

###

Rule #17: Smoke ‘em if you got ‘em!

###

*Come on...*

*Light it.*  
*Light it!*  
*Light! It!*

###

*The First and The Foremost Rule:* It's getting harder and harder to find something new.

###

Do you know what it is like to get high?  
Do you know what it is like to drink beer?  
OK, smart guy, so how do you describe either to one who has done neither?

###

The universe is a glass of liquid amber, illuminated by the glowing tip of a roach. Do not fool yourself into believing you understand either. This is that moment before high, before doing, before consuming, before partaking for that first time, when all the world is a question, all senses are heightened in arousal. It is that part of the high, the trip, when you say to yourself, 'I didn't notice, before, the way the light reflects through a curl of smoke...'

###

Have you ever jonesed?

That's the real question.  
Have you ever had unmet desire?

###

Or have you ever explored, did you dig mushrooms up in your back yard, local cattle field, try that dried banana peel thing, dry them, smoked them, waiting for the effect that never did come?

Well, the first effect is always the waiting, your body, wondering, your mind, at work, all senses go, falling into the moment, into the now, ready for anything, ready for it all, all systems loaded and ready to go...

###

It's called adrenaline!

###

Sitting still in a darkened room, glass panes reflecting back on nothing, might as well be an obsidian wall, a goblet of wine in his hands, is it wine, it is sweet, tasty, good to the taste, sipping, dipping his tongue, not wanting to do too much, not wanting to not do enough, letting the roach burn, cigarette, what is it made of, that's the question, what is it made of, the consistency, purity, it hasn't hit him yet, his mind is still racing, wondering, grasping at straws...

###

*Shit!*  
*Motherfucker!*  
*Oh, yeah!*

###

There is that moment when you don't know, when you are reacting to the placebo, the effect, the ritual, the anticipation; and then, there is that moment when you know, you just know, this is the high.

###

It is a crystalline glow, the room, the world, Steve can see outside the windows once again, his vision has become more acute, he sees things that he did not before, that are not quite there, that would be hard to explain, like reading the words in a book, a novel, stopping, slowing down, pulling out, look words, the letters on the page...

###

The words...

###

L e t t e r s   o n   a   p a g e   .   .   .

###

That's the high, man, dude, can I call you dude, the mind racing at a million miles per hour, pulling in the connections, see those dots of light in the sky dancing, stars come alive, telling me stories, and that red thunder-puff that glows from the roach, a cherry bomb, supernova, delight, and there's a wall of the stuff here, cabinets, drawers, packed full, he could just ride the train, never go back, he's not going back now, not now, not yet, can't go back, not now, not yet, but they'll lay track as long as he wants, he's in command here, now, forever, this moment, and just let it run, the train, on that track, straight on out, till the end of the line...

# # #

He's running out of words.  
I'm running out of words.  
It's time to take stock, best to restock...

# # #

Steve refills his glass.  
Steve rolls another, not nearly as nice as the first, as compact, as well rolled, and lights it.  
Steve sits back in his chair and listens to the clickety-clack of the train... or is it his heartbeat... or the neighbor's kids down the way, yelling in the hall...  
But, no.  
That's not Steve.

Steve sits in his chair, stares at his glass, taking sip after sip and toke after toke, as he tries to figure out what to do... next.

# # #

Steve hasn't got the slightest idea what to do... next.

# # #

*Open the next bottle!*  
*Mix and match!*

# # #

And while you're at it, find out what's in those other boxes and drawers and cabinets and shelves.

# # #

Getting dizzy.

OK.

Fair enough.

For now, let's just sit down, kick back, relax, and put some miles between us.

# # #

'Sir?'

'Excuse me, sir.'

'But dinner is served.'

'And I was wondering if you would be joining us.'  
'Sir?'

###

I'm just going to stand here for second.  
Can you hear the clickety-clack of the train?  
Do you feel the sway of the car, gently rocking back  
and forth?

I can feel these things.  
I can feel the bottle in my hand, smell the smoke in the  
air, and taste the residue of whiskey in the back of my  
throat.

###

Steve steadies himself, gets up, lurches with the train,  
as he grabs another bottle and staggers out the door,  
following the conductor into the next car.

Halfway, he remembers the cigarettes, but he couldn't  
tell you what they did, what effect they were having, so no  
need to go back.

###

Rule #13: There's never much of a need to go back,  
like, ever.

###



There is a lounge car and plenty of time for a pre-dinner drink. Still disoriented, Steve doesn't bother to make eye contact. Rather, he walks up to the bar and starts filling up glasses... partway, what was it, a quarter way to the top?

###

It doesn't matter.  
Let's just say, Steve has no problem ingratiating himself amongst the other guests.

###

If you could read her mind:  
'Is he a prince?'  
'A duke?'  
'How do I drink this?'  
'He's sipping it, so that's what I will do.'

###

Sip after sip after sip.

###

Do we care about them?  
There are three of them: a businessman, his wife, and another. It is this other that draws Steve's interest... on account of her youth, her shape, her figure, her form.

###

It is like that moment when two people kiss for the first time... not that they kiss.

###

Swirling around like the drink in their hands, sipping slowly of each other, talking of nothing, sounding so grand, what is it?

That taste?

Yes, I do believe that is the taste of opportunity knocking.

###

Her name is Candice... and if you'd be a gem and help Steve remember that.

###

When it is time to dine, they sit alone, just the two of them.

And when it is time to order, he does this for both.

###

“The lady,” see, he has already forgotten her name, “has been looking at the calamari? Tell me about the calamari.”

Steve does not much listen to what the man has to say.

“It’s fresh caught?”

Yes, was all Steve needed to hear.

“Excellent! So, I’m thinking the whole squid. I like the eyes. I like to know what I’m eating. But no rice...”

Can’t abide by those carbs, don’t you know. And no, I do not care how many people you were planning to feed with that squid.

But, “A salad sounds good.”

Something simple.

“A raspberry vinaigrette sounds nice.”

Not exactly what the man had suggested, but he will see what he can do.

“With some fresh fruit?”

After all, something is always in season.

“And then, I’m thinking some light tempura.”

Onions, broccoli, and carrots simply will not do. Be creative.

“I think that will do nicely for the lady.”

Yes, all the rumors are true.

“And I’ll have the same, but start with a steak.”

Which doesn’t mean the same, at all; but rather, something entirely different and new, made with love and care, as if your life depended upon it, which it does, so get hopping.

###

Capiche?

###

*It better be good.  
I'm saying.  
We're all saying...*

###

“That looks marvelous!”  
She (I forget her name) is, of course (can there be any doubt) referring to the whole beef tenderloin (as in, the entire thing) that sits before the young gentleman (he really is no such thing, royalty so seldom is) festooned with olives and figs and dates (so the kitchen, at least, tried) braised in a champagne reduction sauce (because it sounds refined) and finally (as all good things must, indeed, come to an end) accompanied by a wide variety of sauces (hedging their bets, the kitchen it did).

###

They are not alone in the car.  
The businessman and his wife sit across the aisle at the next table over.  
He, the business man, is a bit peeved that the best the kitchen was able to do (once they were finished with Steve, of course) was hamburger for him and grill cheese for her,

###

“I hear there was ruckus at the station,” the businessman whispers to his wife, just loud enough to be overheard (the fool). “It won’t be official for some time,”

trains traveling faster than the wire and all that, “but I am to understand there has been some,” and here, one must choose their words carefully, “reorganization at the palace,” a smile crossing his face as he says this last, perhaps, a bit too directly at Steve.

# # #

But then, “It’s not treason if it’s within reason.”

# # #

*I don’t care his reason.*

*It’s definitely treason.*

*And treason is never within reason.*

# # #

And with that, Steve refills the newly just retired businessman’s glass with the last few remaining drops from the bottle: drops which are likely worth more than either of their fortunes at this point in time.

# # #

*Way to go, Steve!*

*There’s the spirit.*

*Spread the wealth.*

*I always liked Steve.*

*And that's why you wanted to whack him?  
In part...*

###

*Rule The Sixth: Sex sells.*

###

Do you care about body fluids?  
Do you care about faces pressed against windows and  
walls?

###

*I can't see!  
I can't see!  
Up against the window!  
That's better!  
Give it to her, Steve!  
That's my boy!*

###

Steve and what's her name (what is her name) are  
back in his room, her face against the Plexiglas window, the  
starlight shining beyond, and the train on the tracks going  
clickity-clack underneath, while Steve gives her the what  
for.

###

*No!*  
*No!*  
*Not the what for!*  
*Damn it, man!*  
*Details!*  
*We want details!*

###

Steve does not respect the girl, does not care about the girl, one might even wonder why he is spending time with the girl. Bodily functions does not explain... the slaps, the pinching, the twists, the tweaks, the pressing of her face against the glass wall.

He is bored.

Steve is bored.

It's like (almost exactly like), 'What can I get this girl to do?' And the answer, of course, is anything, almost anything, well, almost anything as long as it's within reason, but that, that's OK, she's fine with that... or the other thing... and even if she's never tried that final thing before, she's game to try it now, you know, with Steve, because he's royalty, or that is to say, it's different, feels different, this time, with him.

###

*I protest!*  
*I second the motion!*  
*All for?*

*And against?  
The motion is carried.  
We want details!*

###

Rule #43,728: Steve's a fucking prick.

###

Rule #43,729: Steve's a fucking jerk.

###

Rule #17: Don't make it complicated.

###

**Fine!**

###

Rule #43,730: Steve's an asshole.

###

The girl looks happy. As in, she looks like someone who can't remember her own name, who is so content with life, the universe, and everything in it that she just glows.

###



*Is she radioactive?*  
*I don't know.*  
*How would we know?*  
*We could test.*  
*Anyone got a Geiger counter?*

###

Steve fixes her a drink.  
I'm sorry. I got that wrong. Steve fixes himself a drink, has said drink, fixes himself another drink, takes it over to the chair, sits down, puts said second drink on the table beside his chair along with the bottle, at which point, said girl reaches up from the ground where she lays and helps herself to said drink.  
But Steve doesn't stop her.  
So, yeah, basically, Steve fixed her a drink.

###

*What are they trying now?*  
*Is it any good?*  
*He's had so much, how could he tell?*

###

*Steve's Personal Rule: Nothing succeeds like excess.*

###

The girl soon passes out in a pool of her own secretions.

###

Wasting no time, Steve packs his bags.

Suddenly remembering that he has nothing to pack, Steve looks around the room, as he thinks about packing his bags with whatever he can find, but quickly shrugs his shoulders. After all, what would be the point?

###

*Rule of the Endless Void:* There is no point.

###

At the back of the train, Steve smokes (what we shall call) a final cigarette. He has long since thrown his bags overboard. After all, being empty, they are of little use. Moments later, the cigarette joins the bags, out in the Vast Void. And after taking a final swig from the bottle (of whatever he has been drinking), the empty flask joins the rest, in the Vast Void Beyond, making nary a sound as it disappears into the rolling wake of the train.

And then, there being nothing else left to do, Steve climbs onto the back railing, holds his balance for as long as he can (or at least two or three seconds) before {falling, jumping, and/or sliding} over the edge, into the darkness of the night and the Great Beyond.

# # #

*Hoot!*  
*What are you doing?*  
*The train should hoot dramatically as it rolls away*  
*into the night!*

# # #

*Hoot!*  
*Hoot!*  
*Hoot!*

# # #

And I'm sure somewhere, the train goes 'Clickety-clack! Clickety-clack! Clickety-clack!' long into the night.

# # #

The Void?  
The Beyond?  
If one cannot describe such a simple thing as the  
delight to be found in the bottom of a bottle or the sweet  
intoxication to be found rolled up in a tube of leaves, how  
can one expect to ever describe the Great Void Beyond?

# # #

Rule #73: You have to see it to believe it.

###

Rule #74: You still won't believe it.

###

Have you ever been in Hyperspace?  
Have you ever taken a *jump*?  
Can you feel the sickness that results from slipping  
sideways through the ether, too many ways all at once?

###

Nay, I ask you.  
Have you ever tripped the Light Fantastic?  
Have you ever awoken in a mental ward?

###

I like the swirling lights, swirling winds all around...

###

Does everything swirl? One's tongue in one's mouth,  
tasting the various thoughts, ideas, words, just there, on the  
tip of one's tongue?

###

Steve would like a drink.  
Steve would like a smoke.

Steve is not too particular: a drink, a smoke, how do they do that sort of thing in these parts.

###

He's loosing his mind.  
Don't do it, Steve.

###

*Steve...*  
*Steve...*  
*Steve...*

###

What is there to latch onto? That's the question.  
When there is nothing, what is there to latch onto?

###

Only the self..  
Not even the self..

###

Steve would like a drink. He should never have thrown that bottle away. Maybe if he had unhitched the car, uncoupled it from the train, he could even now be spinning around in some cyclone vortex... as experienced from the relative safety and comfort of a first class sleeper.

# # #

Of course, the girl would still be there.  
Good ole what's her name?

# # #

The world is dry, dusty. Steve could use a drink. He'd be happy for just a bandanna, dust in his eyes, dust in his throat, feels like spiders, no, ants, crawling down his throat, it's not real, you know, Steve, it's not real, he says, to himself, who else would listen, he'd still really like that drink, maybe he's had enough to smoke, the world is turning now, it's not just him, the entire world, everything, no stars, stars can be nice, like some giant dust cloud, maybe he's off track, some giant dust cloud, the Horse Head Nebula, wouldn't that be great, take him a while to work his way back from there, but if he were there, the dust would go this way or that, in or out, not just round and round and round like it does here, circling ever closer, is he bringing himself down or is something calling him home, what could call him, who would call him, home, there is no place like home...

# # #

*Steve.*

*Steve!*

*Where you going, Steve?*

###

The lights are pretty cool. It's not just through your eyes. Steve can see through his toes. He can smell with his fingers, you know. And sex, just like rubbing his elbows together...

###

*Steve!*

###

*Steve.*

###

*Steve...*

###

*It's time to wake up, Steve.*

###

*Rules of the Road:* It's better to wake up in a pool of one's own vomit than it is to wake up in a pool of someone else's vomit.

###

The sun is bright.  
The Earth... best not to say The Earth...

###

The ground is hot and dry.

###

Steve pukes.

###

Yeah, Steve could really use that drink right about  
now.

###

There is a town in the distance.  
There is always a town in the distance.

###

*Rule of the Rules:* There will always be rules.

###

And there's always a town in the distance.

###



*I like towns.  
I wonder if they're friendly.  
Better be.  
Steve doesn't have a gun.*

###

Can you taste the fear, like the excess of last night in your mouth? Where are you? That's a good question. What are you? Human? Almost? Close enough for government work...

###

It's the plane flying overhead that freaks Steve out. It's just your standard freak out, nothing to be concerned about. See, the plane, it's probably a probe, a drone, robot controlled, of course, he's gone into the future, far future, which is always somebody's past, perhaps his own, where the computers have taken over, cyborg war, robot future, some crazy computer in charge, they'd probably get along, him and Steve, could share a drink, have to be careful not to spill any of his drink on the keyboard, hard wired, circuits blown, but they'd get along, come to an understanding, and Steve would fight on their side, the robots, hunting down the last of the humans... his own kind.

###

Fuck his own kind!

###

Steve forces himself to stand, forces himself to wave at the airplane flying, five miles high. The plane does not stop, does not notice, does not alter its course... or drop a payload of bombs.

###

*Must! Kill! Humans!*

###

A lizard is looking at Steve.  
“What are you looking at?”  
So, the lizard explains...

###

*Steve!*  
*Steve!*  
*Walk it off, Steve!*

###

Steve has been walking towards town. At the end, right at the edge, where the buildings begin, he stops. Steve would have preferred for the town to be a bit less dusty. Well, no, not really less dusty, just more western-y, you know, six-shooter-y, more romantic-y, more horses and carriages, and little boys running across the main drag,

calling his name, and warning everyone that ‘Steve’ is back in town rather than the car that almost runs him over, radio blasting, not even a truck, the dog straining at it’s chain, expressing it’s concern, and the gas station, weeds overgrown (so at least they’d gotten that part right) with nary a customer in sight.

###

‘Hotel?’

‘Ha.’

‘Motel?’

‘Nope.’

‘Place to stay?’

‘Might try the church.’

‘How about something to eat?’

‘Got money?’

Now it was Steve’s turn to say, ‘Nope.’

‘Then the church is your only option. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ve got to get back to work.’

Clearly, the robots had won.

###

Rule #1001 0110: No one has ever lost betting on the robots to Win, Place, and Show.

###

Rule #0110 1001: That doesn’t really leave much for the rest.

# # #

‘How about a shower?’

‘River’s just up a ways... or you can use the hose out back, just don’t make a mess.’

# # #

Steve opted for the river.

I mean, after all, there’s only so much hospitality a guy can take.

# # #

The river wasn’t that far away nor was it much of a river. But Steve walked right in until the water was up to his chest and ducked right down until the water was over his head, staying there, relaxing, the sun not looking nearly so bright, much more peaceful, relaxing even.

# # #

Under the water, Steve closed his eyes.

If he wanted, he could abort, go anywhere, start someplace new, but it wouldn’t make any difference.

# # #

# # #

###

{{{

*And this is where I shall abort. I am happy enough with the writing. And could continue...*

*As Steve leaves the water, he encounters a man, standing on the bank.*

*They become friends.*

*Go to Vegas.*

*On the way, they might stop at another gas station, a friendlier gas station, and Steve might give the man a gift, an invention, a better way of doing... whatever it was the man at the gas station was doing.*

*But that is not what the story is about. The story is about fun, entertainment. It is about killing time, the reason for life.*

*Steve discovers art.*

*Steve discovers religion.*

*I can't decide whether Steve should set up residence in an old church or some loft apartment... so that means, neither is right and a warehouse must do, one that has gigantic paintings on the wall, Van Gogh originals, you know, what he would have done, did, would do... in an alternate universe that Steve visits.*

*But this still, is not what the story is about.*

*I mean, it is about killing time, being happy, enjoying the flow of words that come unbidden... well, OK, fair*

*enough, those words are bidden very much, thank you very much, and these words that flow through me, come very easily... as long as I have a destination and know where I am going.*

*And I will tell you that destination now... and how we get there... in only a few more words... and then, there will be no further use for words... and Steve and I shall part company and go our separate ways..*

*Steve is looking...*

*Damn it, Steve!  
We haven't got all day!  
Hurry up, man!*

*What do the Rulers of the Universe want? Nothing more than you or I... only to be entertained.*

*Steve is looking for something new, something interesting, something that will justify his journey and make it worthwhile, so when he finally returns home there will be cause for celebration, the prodigal son has returned.*

*So, what trinket could he buy? What invention could he discover? What piece of art could he uncover?*

*Nothing!*

*Nothing!*

*Nothing... compared to the girl of his dreams, the ultimate collectible, desirable... trick ending to a story... that I have now told, so I shall not bore you any longer with the details.*

*The thing Steve was searching for all along was a girl, who he finds. They live happily ever after.*

*The end!*

*Adieu!*

*Saionara!*

*Farewell!*

*Brett Paufler*

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*A work of fiction.*

*Nothing is real!*

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*The End*

*}}}*