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We're Gonna Need a Bigger Boat

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We're Gonna Need a Bigger Boat

The BMW coupe's massive engine roars to life beneath me. I instinctively reach to turn off the radio, but they're playing "Hell's Bells" by AC/DC and I leave it on. After searching through all the lighted buttons on the radio faceplate, I kick it up a few notches.

I give the five-speed stick a nudge into gear and pull out of a numbered parking space. I admire the feel of the leather-bound steering wheel under my grimy fingers, then slam on the brakes to avoid some of the Walking Dead—drunk yuppies stumbling to their cars after Last Call. In a second the car has a swarm of people around it, and I have to honk just so I can lurch forward enough to look for a break in traffic.

Unbelievable. Two-thirty in the goddamn morning and there are still people everywhere. More of them, a seemingly endless stream of fumbling Armani suits and Gucci dresses, block my view of the road, and I honk again, revving the engine, scattering them. I see a break in the traffic and scream out of the lot and onto Euclid Avenue.

The back-of-the-mind worry that I'll nick some rich fuck's baby fades as I pull the BMW in front of the Spy club. Once I get my tip, I'm done for the night. I hop out of the car, remove and tear up the claim check from the rear-view mirror, and judge from my bulging pockets that this has been a very profitable night, despite the fact that it has been an endless torrent of grumpy, faceless people.

The BMW belongs to Charles Nagy, a pitcher for the Cleveland Indians, and he usually tips pretty well, but today I remember he pitched an eight-inning shutout (it was only against the Tigers, but still), so I'm hoping he's feeling more generous than usual. He meets me in front of the car after extricat-

ing himself from a crowd of rabid fans in front of the club. He smiles at me, possibly because he remembers that I don't harangue him with stupid baseball questions when I park his car. Or maybe he just deals with one relatively calm valet better than thirty-odd freaks demanding to know why he didn't catch that line drive in Game Seven of last year's World Series.

"You guys ever think of just driving off with one of these?" he asks, patting a 20-spot into my hand.

"Nah," I say, nodding thanks and gesturing towards the car, "I got one just like this for every day of the week."

Nagy chuckles a little and stands by the open car door. It never fails—always the last one of the night wants to have a conversation with me. I don't care if he's a ballplayer right now—all I want to do is go home and get some sleep.

"Seriously, man," he says, shaking his head, "there's guys who're like that, you know, they have, like, nine Porsches or something, and these huge garages that look more like warehouses than anything else." He whistles. I smile politely.

"Must be nice," I say, thinking I don't want to hear you complain Mr. Eleven-Million-Dollar-Contract. He shrugs, and, noticing me fidgeting, grudgingly moves toward the driver's seat.

"Yeah, well, seems like an awful waste of space to me. One of these days we're gonna run out of room," he says, pulling the door shut and leaving me with the thought. My shift, nearing 8 hours now, is finally over.

Fifteen minutes later, I'm torquing down I-77 in my economical Mitsubishi Mirage, wondering whether I can afford spending the wad of cash in my pocket—mostly ones; some smart-ass bank teller once asked if I was a male stripper—on something splurgy and fun, or if I should be a good little in-debt College Boy and bank it. The radio is playing a block of Black Sabbath songs now. I turn up the volume and accelerate to 80, singing along. I smile a little. This time of night—past three a.m.—is always a fun time to drive. Not too much cop-worry, and little traffic to deal with. During rush-hour on this highway I'd be lucky to be doing 20 when the lanes are congested with belching trucks who don't know or don't care that they're blocking the fast lane, or other cars who honk at the trucks as if—

—around the bend in the highway the bottleneck seems to come out of nowhere. I slam on the brakes hard and miss the car in front of me by mere inches, thanking my lucky charms and fruity pebbles that there was nobody tailgating behind me. Damn. I must be more tired than I thought, not registering all the red tail-lights in front of me like that. I shake my head and try to catch my breath.

A mile or so ahead, I can see a mass of emergency lights; looks like a big pile-up of some kind. The cars in front of me aren't moving at all, so it must be pretty major. I make a mental note to go easy on Charles Nagy next time he gives up three homers in an inning; it might well have been him not leaving the Spy club till Last Call that kept me back here instead of up there where my eyes might be contemplating the back of my skull right now. I lean back in my seat as a couple of ambulances speed by along the berm. This could take a while.

The grinding chords of Sabbath's "Into the Void" roll through my speakers like molten lava, so I turn it up and roll down the window to catch some air. A song about sending rocket ships to the stars to escape a dying, overpopulated world, a song that also just happens to have the most killer guitar riff in history, deserves to be heard by those around me, too. I realize I'm acting like an ingrate suburban teenager, but it's almost 4 a.m. and I'm tired, hungry, and stuck in a traffic jam. What the fuck.

The car in front of me, a rusty old Volvo belching fumes from a muffler that looks like it's been through two world wars, has about a hundred bumper stickers plastered to its entire rear-end.

"Abortion is **MURDER!**" one reads. Another, "Save the Rainforests: Plant a Tree!" Still another, "**BOYCOTT TUNA.**" So many stickers mask the car that they had to stick one on top of the other in places. This caused some unintentional messages, like "**MURDER...a Child to Read!**" or "Plant a Tree!...in Peace," or "Mothers Against Drunk **TUNA.**"

I should be amused, but it's 4 a.m. and I'm stuck smelling Volvo Hippie Fumes. A few cars are behind me now, so I'm completely stuck in this bottleneck. Christ, a traffic jam four hours before the morning rush.

I sigh. The song draws to a thundering close, Ozzy singing the line "Rocket engines burning fuel so fast" as a few more cars and a truck join the

party behind me, boxing me in. One honks. I wish I could hop on one of those rocket ships right now. I grimace, looking at Mr. Volvo's bumper stickers and tapping my fingers to the song. It was written thirty years ago, when everyone else was singing about such unattainable concepts as Peace and Love. "Pollution kills the air, the land, the sea. Man prepares to meet his destiny," Ozzy sings. Thirty years ago, the people who spoke of these things were shrugged off. Bleak futures like that were nothing but science fiction. They were Charlton Heston screaming "It's *people!* Soylent Green *is people!*" So those making dire predictions such as this were swept under the carpet as the rest of the world felt good about themselves for banning DDT and recycling.

Since the song "Into the Void" was penned by four gloomy lads in Birmingham, England in 1971, the world's population has doubled. As a result, famine, environmental destruction, and the world's ignorance of the root cause of these curses have all skyrocketed.

I've had this shit memorized for years. Thanks to my dad, an expert doom-sayer, I've had to deal with bleak visions of the all-too-near future my whole life. Whenever my parents had people over for dinner and, for whatever reason, my dad felt the need to be rid of them, he started talking about this stuff. He gets his figures, as I now do, from almanacs and scientific journals, and his ideas from Asimov and Sagan.

I remember when just after we moved our neighbors came over, bearing funny-looking meat-pies and cheap wine. An elderly couple, they stayed for hours, the husband, a burly Polish man who wore a wifebeater shirt that unflatteringly showed off his back-hair, droning on and on about fishing trips he took with the former owner of our house. Well, before long my dad started talking about overpopulation, using the husband's proud claim of having thirty grandchildren (as if they were trophies on his mantle or something) as a cue. At first, our new neighbors just smiled politely, shaking their heads, but not really caring. Not at first. I remember sitting back in my chair and chuckling at their reactions to my dad's fun-facts, like the new (and increasing) statistic that *every three days* a population equal to the city of Los Angeles is added to the already swollen total, amounting to 120 Million new people each year. As if to help them remember the "good old days," my dad reminded them that in 1940, there

were barely 100 million people in the entire United States.

By then, our guests were fidgeting in their seats, the woman giving her husband Shouldn't-We-Be-Leaving-Now eye-signals. But my dad, eager to pay them back for our having to listen to an hour-long dissertation on fly-fishing, wouldn't give them an opening. Once he gets himself going, his facts just get nastier and nastier, growing and compounding on themselves much like the population figures he speaks of.

I smile from the memories—our neighbors, while very polite, never set foot in our house after that fateful evening. I look at Mr. Volvo, who is now talking on a cellular phone and waving his arms around, pointing to the bottleneck before him. People like him need to hear stuff like this, because people like him think they give a shit—they just don't give a shit about the right things. Like the abortion sticker. Come on. People simply don't realize we're living on a finite amount of space, and sooner or later the population will be so large wars will be fought over food and water, and things like rocket ships to moon colonies won't sound so much like science fiction.

The fact is, when it comes to abortion and birth-control, the Chinese had the right idea back in the 80s. They are the only country in the world with, pardon the pun, the balls to admit to the problem of overpopulation, and to try and do something about it. The government made it illegal for families to have more than one child. If a woman got pregnant for the second time, she would be given a special pill by her doctor which would terminate the pregnancy.

You're probably turning your nose at this. I'm *sure* Mr. Volvo would have none of it. He'd probably make a comment on the godless Communists, or some other crap that really doesn't mean anything outside of a soundbite. And this is precisely why we are doomed.

I look out the driver's-side window at the waning moon arcing towards Lake Erie, shaking my head at the futility of it all. The Chinese plan was successful in slowing, *slowing*, mind you, their exponential population growth-rate, but the uproar it caused around the world spelled its demise. Nothing can stir up emotion like the thought of dead babies, and no talk of starving, overpopulated futures can compare with the image of a woman being forced into an abortion clinic. It is one of the human race's primary fallacies—we only concern

ourselves with making Now better, rather than providing for Later. Saving a baby from abortion makes Now better—for the baby, at least. As for the future, take a trip to Tokyo (current population: 25 million) for a taste of what the future we have so long ignored might be like. When the population doubles again (according to the projections of the *World Almanac*, we're due to hit 12 billion by 2030), only a tiny fraction of the people in the world will enjoy a comfortable living standard—and by then “comfortable” will be what we now call “barely getting by.”

That's right. Depending on your sources, between 70 and 80 percent of the current world population lives in what Americans consider poverty. So, to this vast majority, those of us in the lower end of the “lower middle-class” are rich as sin. We have no idea how lucky we are.

I jerk the handbrake back and lean back in my seat—the bottleneck still hasn't moved. I trace my fingers along the imitation leather of my steering wheel, realizing that only an hour before, I was wrapped up in envy at Charles Nagy's car. I resented him for the fact that he owned a car more luxurious than most people's homes; resented the fact that I didn't have one, too.

When I think of all the millions—billions, really—of people who would feel the same resentment toward me for my Mitsubishi Mirage, for my \$6 an hour plus tips valet job, for the dorm room I have to share only with one person rather than twelve, I positively shiver. Most of these people, many living in abhorrently crowded living conditions in third-world countries, haven't yet realized just what we have. But we're in the information age now. Sooner or later, the rest of the world is going to find out that 14% of the population of the world controls most of the world's wealth. And when they do, well, all I can think of is the storming of the Bastille. Eventually, the mob will rule.

I look at Mr. Volvo's bumper stickers again, wonder if maybe he does know what's going to happen. Probably not. People like him are always talking about whales and trees. What they don't realize is that saving the humpback whale and planting a new forest somewhere isn't going to do a hell of a lot. Like the myth of the hydra, these are only quick fixes, they don't attack the root of the problem. Sooner or later the head will grow back, teeth snapping.

“Save the Gray Whale!” reads one of his stickers. By now, all of these

thoughts, combined with the stress of the traffic jam and the bone-tired feeling in my body, have me really wound up. I lean back in the drivers' seat and imagine what I would say to Mr. Volvo about his precious Gray Whales.

Sure, they're cute, they make cuddly stuffed animals for the kiddies, they're great bumper sticker fodder. And yes, many of the people hunting these blubbery wonders are doing so illegally. Great. But you know something? The Gray Whales, and any other whales for that matter, don't mean shit to our survival, to the environment. Instead, what are vitally important to our survival, especially with more and more people crowding the earth, are the trillions of tiny little phytoplankton that live in the oceans. These little guys aren't very cute, they don't make good stuffed animals or afternoon cartoon heroes, but they allow us to breathe. They take in more of our exhaled carbon dioxide and produce more oxygen than anything else on earth, now that most of the rainforests have been decimated.

And they don't fall out of the fucking sky, either.

Phytoplankton live in the shallow waters no more than 100 or so miles from our shores. These seas are shallow enough for light to reach the bottom and do its photosynthesis thing with the phytoplankton. But the plankton is being destroyed because these coastal areas are where the world's population dumps its shit, piss, and other, nastier, waste. Mr. Volvo's whales aren't helping either, since most of them feed on these phytoplankton, each one consuming tons of them, literally, every day. They also exhale carbon dioxide just like we do, and carbon dioxide, not hairspray or factories, is the chief villain to the ozone layer. So, Mr. Volvo's bumper sticker should read "**Kill the Whales, Save the Phytoplankton.**" Doesn't have much of a ring, does it?

My gaze lowers to one of Mr. Volvo's many rainforest stickers. Well, it's a little late for that, isn't it? Only a tiny fraction of the world's rainforests still stand, and they are, right now, being obliterated, slowly but surely. The trees of rainforests are nourished by nutrients found nowhere else in the world, and it is these nutrients, many of which scientists have yet to study, that allow these trees to provide the world with oxygen. The rest of the oxygen that the phytoplankton are not producing, that is. People don't seem to realize that, for the same reason that a car gets stuffy and hot when five people are jammed into it with the

windows shut, the earth is getting warmer and stuffier due to increasing levels of carbon dioxide and decreasing levels of oxygen. All thanks to the increasing population.

Rainforests are disappearing not only because we keep chopping them down to make toilet paper for our non-aborted miracles, but also because, over the aeons, rainwater and erosion has washed away most of the valuable nutrients that feed these trees and enable them to serve as lungs for our planet. Soon, very soon, our lungs will be gone. What then?

I think of my dad again. It's almost 5 a.m. now, and he's probably getting ready to go to work. He works at the Cleveland Metroparks Zoo, which now boasts an artificial rainforest. The one exhibit there that nobody pays much attention to—the wide variety of colorful birds and lizards distract them, I guess—is the one my dad designed. It's a huge map of the world hanging on a wall (surrounded by hanging plants and vines for that “natural look”). Fiber-optics show the locations of the world's rainforests and their decline from 1800 to present day. When the map is set to 1800 it looks like a Christmas display.

When it's set to Present Day I've actually heard little kids ask their mommies if the thing is broken.

As a final cheery note, guests leaving the rainforest are treated to a huge digital LED display, which shows the number of acres of rainforest currently on the earth. It's a big number, in the millions, in fact, but the last couple of digits fall faster than the eye can register. My dad had wanted to put another LED next to it, displaying the current world population, which, funnily enough, is rising at even a faster pace, but I guess the Zoo people thought that might be a little too heavy for people leaving the exhibit area. After all, the gift shop, where you can make your Contribution to the Cause by buying bumper stickers, is right around the corner.

The bleating of a truck's horn snaps me out of my bleak reverie. The bottleneck in front of me has cleared; Mr. Volvo is moving on down the interstate.

“The fuck're you waiting for?” someone behind me yells. Embarrassed, I undo the handbrake and get moving, rolling up the window as I try to catch up to the flow of traffic.

I turn the radio on again, and they're playing Pink Floyd now. I raise the volume, and the words "Mommy's going to make all of your nightmares come true" filter through my car.

My mind is still churning. I always get to this point when I think about overpopulation, and the collective stupidity of myself and the rest of the human horde to ignore it. Cut off the hydra's head, three more grow back.

People think I'm paranoid, or anti-social, when I talk about this stuff. So, unlike my dad, who revels in that, I don't talk about it much. Because someone always asks the inevitable question. "Well, what can we do to stop this?"

We *can* stop this. Maybe. But we won't. The sacrifices we'd have to make are too great. A recent study reported that even if everyone on earth limited themselves to having 2 children or less, then the world's population might *level off* in fifty years. Level off. By that time, the destruction of the environment may already be worse than any science fiction imagination could ever conjure. Fifty years from now, there will be 10-12 billion people on earth. Where's the food going to come from? Already, farmers are resorting to new chemicals and hybrids to grow crops in emaciated soil. We don't know the effects of this yet, any more than we knew what we were doing when we started spraying something called DDT on crops 40 years ago.

What about water? Scientists are struggling to find an efficient way of desalinating sea-water. So far, the machines that our scientists have developed for this process are so expensive and inefficient they might as well be trying to turn lead into gold. So, barring any miracles, water is going to become a big problem. Droughts are already becoming more and more frequent and deadly; just check a current almanac and compare it to one from fifty years ago. If we're not going to impose radical birth control restrictions on not one country, but the *whole world* (imagine the logistics of *that*), we're going to have to get used to taking very short showers. And that's the tip of the iceberg.

With 6 billion more people on the earth, the global temperature, due to increased levels of carbon dioxide, will rise even further. Polar icecaps will start melting and pushing their water on our shores, giving us even less space than before. *El Nino* effects will become common occurrences. Smog, fog, heat

indexes, erratic weather patterns, the list is infinite. It's chaos theory in its purest form: each new baby brought into this world is responsible, as we all are, for a staggering amount of global destruction. And instead of attacking the problem at its root, we try to curb its effects. Another severed hydra head at our feet.

I'm almost home now, and I hate myself. I've known about this shit for so many years, and all I've done about it is scare a few drunk people at parties. And now, after a few hours sleep and a good meal, maybe a long, hot shower, I'm sure I'll forget about all this for another day. I'll push it all under the carpet again, put it off when what I should be doing is screaming about it to anyone who'll listen. But I can't do that—I wouldn't want to be locked up.

I pull into the garage, and notice a light on in our neighbor's house. Mr. Grumney, the man with the back-hair my dad scared off all those years ago, is up already, reading the paper. As I walk from the garage to the house, I look in at him—he looks very complacent, happy. All of the facts and figures my dad pumped into him that time, leaving him white as a sheet, are swept so far under his carpet he probably thinks they've disappeared by now.

He looks up from his paper and meets my gaze. I wave, and stumble to my front door. I'm just another part of the horde, just like the ones I almost ran over with Charles Nagy's car a few hours back.

Ah! That reminds me—I have tickets to a game this weekend! Visions of hot dogs and foul balls dancing in my head, I head for the kitchen to rustle up a snack while I count my money.