

1

When I start a cult, it won't be anything like the ones you see on TV.

The newscasters survey the burned out farmhouse or the body bag strewn patio and talk about how the Church of Eternity offered its late membership "a strong sense of belonging."

I'm willing to believe that there are a lot of people who really look for that sort of thing, and really want to be part of something that makes them feel like they matter, and makes them feel good about themselves. It must be true, or we wouldn't be clucking our tongues at the watercooler on Monday, talking about the Martown tragedy. I just think that those people—the *belongers*—are the vocal minority of prospective cult members.

I don't think most people want that kind of belonging. We live our lives in as much isolation as possible. The guy down the hall from me at my new apartment actually pins money to his door when he orders pizza. That way, he doesn't need to open the door until the pizza guy is gone. I've seen him open the door and grab the box from the floor, like he's part of some secret deal. To be fair, the only thing that keeps me from doing the same thing is the fact that I know the pizza guy would think I was pathetic. That kind of sentiment won't help membership.

In my cult, I will make sure that every member feels as uncomfortable and awkward as possible. They will want to stay at home and slide the pizza money under the door and look down at their feet when they pass each other in the street. They will want to order the pizza online to avoid talking to the person on the phone who might not speak English, or, worse, who might. They will drink Gevalia Kaffe, because they can avoid the social interaction implied by the chess tables and armchairs at Starbucks.

There won't be meetings, and there won't be leader worship, and we won't exclude based on anything. I think everyone will join. Everyone who doesn't join at the beginning will make everyone else feel like they want to join, just by being themselves.

In the end, though, we'll go out like all our predecessors, and everyone will be relieved. *Everyone.*

2

I'm on my back.

I'm relaxing.

A cool river runs through my veins.

I am calm.

Everyone else gets calm with me. We are happy.

There's a white light ahead. It grows brighter.

3

On Mondays I get to work early. This makes a good impression. To be honest, I don't care about the impression I make. I did once, but it's been a long time. Even if I did care, I think it's too late to change anyone's opinion for the better, especially just by showing up early.

When I get to my cube, it's quarter of nine. I log into my workstation and walk away. I go to the bathroom, then I go down the hall to the vending machines, where I get a coffee and buy something I can eat quickly, like a granola bar or chocolate. I go back to my cube. I eat breakfast while I wait for my computer to finish logging in.

By this time, it's after nine and everyone else is showing up, but I'm already there. My coffee cup is half empty. I have Outlook open. I look productive. My printer is already "Warming Up. . . ." I have already deleted thirty-seven pieces of spam. I am a model of efficiency.

I don't get along with my peers.

I am a Document Imager. Within a few years, I will be replaced by a machine with the same name as my job title. We work the same way; someone hands us a stack of forms and we turn it into a file on a gigantic hard drive somewhere down in the network. I also feature the ability to walk the original forms down to the Document Shredder around the corner. The Document Shredder is already a machine.

I work for the Government of the United States of America. I also work for Tom's Fast Photo. I work for Documation—"We Love Documents!"—and we'll work for anyone. You can imagine that the federal government is not sending us sensitive or interesting documents to be imaged. Last week I was working on a folder for them. A red folder. Red folder means "urgent and sensitive." I imaged one hundred eighty seven pages of gasolene reimbursement logs.

I work hard until lunch. At lunch, I leave my cube and walk a few laps around the building. Sometimes I buy a pretzel from Ahmed at the corner. Or a Mountain Dew. I get along with Ahmed. We have a very stable relationship. He shows up at the corner every day, and I buy lunch from him. When money isn't so tight, I will buy lunch from him every day, and that part of my life will be perfected.

After lunch I can slow down. If anyone checks in on me, I will have completed enough work for the day already. After lunch I do almost nothing. By five, I have still completed the most imaging of our thirty Document Imagers. One of my bosses will notice this and commend me on it, but will look nervous.

I don't log out until five ten or so. It makes it look like I'm not itching to leave. I'm not itching to leave. There's nowhere to go. I used to go to the hospital for dinner and then out for a few drinks and then home. Lately, it's hard to remember what goes on between five ten and quarter of nine. I think it's all the same things, just in different proportion and different order.

4

I had a blind date last night.

It went badly. I threw up in the bathroom and walked out. I hope she doesn't call me. I don't remember if I gave her my number.

5

For weeks, I haven't been able to get a good night's sleep. A couple shots of bourbon helps, but not a lot. There are diminishing returns on night after night of drunk's sleep.

Sometimes I wake up on the sofa, still dressed, with the TV on to a channel I'd never watch. Lifetime. Fox Family. It's not a good way to wake up, but it's tolerable as long as my shoes are off.

Sometimes I wake up on top of the bed. I'm getting better at making it every day, and I don't like to muss it up after it's made.

Usually, though, I'm in bed, on my side. I sweat more, lately, too. In bed.

Terry suggested a noise machine. "My roommate in college had one. I hated the damn thing, but he couldn't sleep without it."

I got one despite the recommendation. It hisses like a broken radiator. It has other settings, too. I call them "detuned radio" and "flooded engine." They don't help me sleep, but they provide a good excuse for my insomnia.

I want to build my own noise machine. It will make noises that I think will help me sleep. I don't know how. I need to read a book on it, maybe.

In the meantime, I'll have to stock up on bourbon and see what's on the Fine Living Network.

6

Wake up (on the sofa). Take a shower. Get dressed. Get to work (early). Log in. Eat breakfast. Work. Eat lunch. Space out. Leave work. Lose track.

7

Wake up (at the computer). Take a shower. Get dressed. Get to work (on time). Log in. Eat breakfast. Work. Work through lunch. Work late. Walk home the long way. Stop for dinner. Stop for drinks. Stop and watch the stoplights change color.

Wake up (on the bed).

8

I blame a lot of it on that bitch Kramer.

One night, a long time ago, back when I had plenty of different moods, I was in a strange one. I thought maybe life was finding some kind of balance, and that things might end up making sense, at least for some definitions of “making sense.”

This web comic I read had a single-cell strip. A character rants, “When I jerk off, I feel good for about twenty seconds and then WHAM it’s right back into suicidal depression.” It made me laugh. I printed it out, stuck it in a frame, and put it on Maggie’s nightstand. “So you’ll know I’m thinking of you,” I told her.

Hours ended at eight. Long visits are the benefit of chronic care over ICU; hours ending at eight are a drawback. When you begin thinking of visiting hours as a drawback of chronic care, you are losing perspective. Even back then, I was past that stage.

At eight, I left and went home. I made some dinner and ate it. I read a book for a while. Eventually I got tired and slept, in the bed, under the covers, no devil’s radio needed.

The next day, it didn’t seem as funny. I got home and stared at the wall. I started at the news. I jerked off. Twenty seconds later, WHAM. Right back into suicidal depression.

The day after that, I decided I’d get rid of it. It wasn’t funny, it was a pathetic reminder: happiness limit, twenty seconds.

When I got to the room, though, it was already gone. Everything else was just where I left it. The frame wasn’t. I checked the drawer. I checked under the bed. I checked behind the nightstand. It was gone. Finally, I called the nurse—something I hadn’t brought myself to do for quite a while.

“Oh,” she said, “you put there there?” Of course I had. I was the only visitor. “I removed it. We didn’t feel it was appropriate.”

Appropriate? I think the word had been carefully calculated to stun me into complete helplessness. Just as she began to turn, though, I managed to croak, “What?”

“Well, sir, we didn’t feel it was in keeping with the environment we’re trying to foster, here. We have to think of the nurses’ comfort, after all, not to mention the patients’.”

I glared. My eyes glazed over. I took a deep breath and turned to look at the other bed. The ancient body in it remained asleep, as if dead. “Your nurses can wipe Wally’s ass for him, but they can’t take a little sophomore humor?”

The nurse frowned. She didn’t want to deal with me. She wanted to get back to our previous, more convenient relationship. The name on her tag was KRAMER. I made a mental note. “There’s a difference, sir, between—”

“Sure. Everybody can deal with jerking off. It takes a strong stomach to wipe the shit off an old man’s ass. Don’t dick around with me. You’re not here to pro—”

“We are *here* to care for our patients, including your wife, not to cater to your sense of . . . humor.”

My jaw clenched of its own accord, and then my knuckles. My mind reeled, and I’m sure I saw spots. I took a step toward her, and I realized that this

argument was ridiculous. She wasn't really going to hold her ground. She couldn't, even if she wanted to. This didn't make me feel better. "*You* are here to keep an eye on her, and *I* am here to care for her. *You* are her fucking *life support*, and I am her *life*! You know *nothing* about her, or what she thinks, or what makes her laugh, or what makes her happy. You know how to change her fucking *bedpan*, so until she needs that, why don't you get the fuck out of here and let me get back to doing what *I'm* here to do?"

Kramer looked like I'd spit on her, and I almost had. She didn't say anything, which was definitely for the best, and she left. It took me a while to catch my breath and calm down, and when I finally realized what I'd just accomplished, I cried into my hands.

The next day, the frame was back, though, and I felt like I'd won something for the first time in a long time.

Then twenty seconds later, WHAM! Right back into suicidal depression.