

## **Fnord**

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In a small cell a man is woken by drops of water falling on his forehead. Even in the near-total darkness of the chamber, it is clear he is groggy and disoriented. When he finally tries sitting up, he finds restraints down the length of his arms--his legs, too. A short, panicky struggle shows even his head doesn't move. And the drops keep falling.

"HELP! HELLO!" he calls out hoarsely. His voice is dry and flimsy, but he croaks on. "SOMEONE! I CAN'T MOVE! AND I'VE BEEN DRUGGED!"

We didn't anticipate they would make it so hard for him to talk. God dammit, that's totally counterproductive.

Dark as it is in there, his eyes are wide, pupils huge. You can see his eyeballs frantically racing around in his skull. He probably doesn't even know how large is this room he's in.

"SOMEONE PLEASE HELP ME *NOW!* ...SOMEONE PLEASE HEAR THIS."

Hahaha.

"PLEASE HURRY! I'M--FOLLOW MY VOICE!"

He's still now, laid out on the slab like da Vinci's Vitruvian man. The march of tiny water drops continues against his forehead. He can't discern the source, but the drops are too regular for just a roof leak, or any drip that happens naturally. They tell me it's once every 1.6 seconds, if you were interested.

"...I THINK I'M BEING TORTURED."

Drops hit him a little above the space between his eyebrows. They pound against the thin *squamous* segment of the frontal bone, where underneath the frontal lobes flesh out his thoughts.

"I'M AN AMERICAN! I--I HAVE MONEY, IN ACCOUNTS!"

The frontal lobes serve as an emotional control center. They are home to one's personality. Functions like problem solving, memory, language, and judgment happen here.

"MY NAME IS BRIAN JENKINS. AMERICAN. U-S-A. FREEDOM, GODDAMMIT!"

There is no other part of the brain where lesions can cause such a wide variety of symptoms.

One must wonder what thoughts come to the man strapped against the table, feeling the moments of his life sap in little taps of water against that skull.

Well, don't you?

"The fuck did I do to anybody?" he says more softly. "Who the--fuck, it's--too much, much too much *too much*" he mumbles on, seemingly on the edge. His features scrunch up and he makes a high-pitched little whimper for a moment. Now see the water streaming down his face, not too unlike it has been for the last ten minutes.

An instant later he composes himself. His expression, if not relaxed, at least is forced back into a normal state. "All right, Brian. This is too weird to start panicking already. Pull yourself together. You have to. You have to."

*Pat, pat, pat, pat...*

"There's a reason someone went to the trouble of tying you up. Water torturing you. Drugging you. He wants something from you. Which means you have power yet."

As you may know from TV in the 60's, "truth serum" is the nickname of sodium pentothal. The name "sodium pentothal" is actually a trademark of the drug manufacturer, the drug's proper name being thiopental sodium. Like with hypnosis, you can't really break down someone's mind until they'll be unable to lie with just thiopental sodium. All you can do is loosen one's inhibitions. The real reason it's called truth serum is for the way it causes subjects to become very communicative, verbalizing thoughts easily, and without discretion.

"Just hold it together, Brian. This, you can talk yourself through this."

Thiopental sodium is available all over the world, used often for psychiatric work. However, it is also useful, in certain doses, as an ultra-short acting barbiturate, i.e., a knock-out agent. Bonus.

"Someone's softening you up, Brian. Someone's getting you willing for something, ready to do anything. Someone wants you to crack before they even meet you."

Now he's noticed us. The darkness in which he is immersed is so complete that even a few photons matter. So bucking hard against the brace, his eyes rolled way over in their sockets, he sees the tiny red LED.

Hi, Brian.

"Hey. Is that a surveillance camera?"

Smile.

“Hello? Someone? Please respond. PLEASE FUCKING ANYONE.”

We are not through here.

“Is anybody there? Is there any point to talking at all?”

*Pat, pat...pat, pat, pat...*

His eyes dart to the source of the leak, then back to the little red light.

“Glad to know I’m not alone in this.

“Well, who are you? What is all this? What’s your name?”

*Pat, pat, pat, pat...*

“I’ll call you Rudolph. I’m Brian Jenkins, I’m from Maine. Unemployed. I never learned to ball room dance.”

The effects are becoming noticeable.

“So, tied up, drugged, *and* goin’ crazy? I was going to visit my parents this weekend, so I guess I should be grateful, Rudolph.” His eyes turn back up toward the leak.

“Brian Jenkins, at your disposal.”

The Babylonian Code of Hammurabi decreed a test of innocence whereby a man was tossed into the holy river. It was believed the river would spare the innocent and crush the guilty.

“It’s a pretty common name. Are you sure you’ve got the right guy?”

The Assyrians would later reverse this in their own culture. The innocent were destroyed.

*Pat, pat, pat, pat...*

“You know the bitch of this? I’m really thirsty.”

I give this guy a few hours.

“...but it’s all right, ‘cause this bitch had a huge ass anyway. I mean, deployed-airbag huge. Yeah, I kept dropping hints and shit, like, ‘Hey, is that coke a diet? No? *Oh.*’ Maybe she got it and just didn’t care. Damn, I miss that bitch.

“So how much longer am I gonna have to lie strapped here? My clothes are all soaked through.”

He pauses to eye the camera and flash his teeth, like his story was so enthralling that I forgot to turn off the torture machine.

“All right, then, where were we?...oh right, so that’s how my third relationship ended. Fourth? Whatever. Then I met Monique. Now, with a name like Monique, you must be thinking, This surely is an exotic and worldly woman. Actually, shit with her was just a mundane as the other three. Four.”

I actually think I might crack before this guy.

“Oh, one thing about Monique: she was a virgin when I met her. Yeah, she’d almost made it through four years of college without some slime ball coming along. Enter me. The unbelievable thing was that afterward, *she* apologized to *me*. She was sure she had messed it all up. Naturally, I told her that it was OK, and that I could show her the way, as I was a sexual ninja. I swing a katana, baby.

“To prove my sexual sophistication, I pretended to be an expert in moves that were only really jokes among my guy friends. You may remember 'The Admiral' from your high school locker room. That’s when you’re doing a girl from behind and you try to crash her into stuff.

“Haha. A lamp or desk or something. As much as you can.

“Yeah, I did that a couple times. I be like, ‘Ooh, I’m sorry, baby. You OK? Yeah? You wanna keep going? OK...’

“WHAM.

“One idea I was dying to try out was the ‘Chili Dog’

“When I pitched this idea the first time Monique started to wonder whether my sexual techniques were really that sought after. Oh, Monique, I say to her, this happens all the time. All your friends are doing this. And she says, ‘I don’t believe that. No girl would ever let someone do that to her.’

“Well, of course you’d have to coke her up real good first.

“ ‘Monique,’ I said, ‘when you’re ready, you’re going to beg me for this stuff. Really.’

*“Brian, I can’t get off without you taking a dump on my chest. Please, Brian, just a little poop.*

“We stayed together for about a year, by which time she had earned the sexual black belt. I’m not even gonna say what the black belt test was, ‘cept sometimes I still feel it when I reach to tie my shoes.

“So before you judge, we both really enjoyed the sexual ninja program. Go ahead and imagine two ninjas having sex. Don’t tell me that Judo stuff isn’t foreplay every once in a while up in Hokkaido.

“Our relationship actually ended pretty soon after the sexual ninja program. Say what you want about it, but it kept things interesting.

“You think I’m weird, Rudolph? Am I deviant?...Never mind, I know how people with cameras think.

“Hey, if real ninjas can punch through a pile of cinder blocks with one punch, then why, when two ninjas fights, don’t their heads explode when they hit each other? I’ve kinda wanted an answer to that since I was six.

“Anyway, it remains my firm belief that boredom is the most powerful force in the universe. Gravity is nothing. Especially since the actual force of gravitons is meager. It’s just that this force is cumulative across the universe. Everything is pulling toward everything else. But right up to the Big Crunch, when the universe collapses under it’s own weight, we’ll be inventing stuff, trying to colonize the universe, etc., just out of boredom. A force strong enough to pull even ninjas apart.

“Right now, there’s nothing physically wrong with me. But something monotonous is destroying me.

“I think personally, and you can call this the Jenkins theory, that there is a reason for the universe existing. And that is because without us, who’d be here to marvel at all this?

“I wonder if Monique remembers me. I wonder where she ended up.

“Haha. I don’t even know where *I* am. I could just be havin a reaction. I could be on the kitchen floor right now.

He tries to face the camera, and says, “Don’t make your own drugs, kids. Fuck, Eric can barely make himself a sandwich.

“Eric’s good to have around, though. He’s my buddy. I’ll hold off on telling you

his last name, though. He doesn't like his whole name floating around.

“Wait a minute. Is this a Fnord thing?”

*Pat, pat, pat...*

“Cause that's Eric's thing. I just live with him.

“We met along Taiga street. It was election season and there were all these signs for George Bush along the road. Signs goddamn everywhere, even obscuring other signs. He was walking down the side of the road when he saw me, going the other way, tearing up all the signs.

“He asked why I was doing it, and I didn't really have a reason for him. So he starts walking down my side of the street with me, helping me out with a bunch of reasons for doing what I was doing. Bush is a moron, he said, which I'd heard lots of times before. It all made sense, he said, since politics is the second most anti-intellectual force in America today. I might have been polite and asked what the most anti-intellectual force was, but a passing car stopped next to us just then. A guy got out and opened his wallet. He gave us each 20 bucks and said, Awesome job. Getting paid to destroy stuff is awesome.

“As you can see, we started out a real partnership. I asked him if he knew the Old Port, and he said yeah, he had tagged it a bunch. So I guess we shared turf. You know the neighborhood, Rudolph, cause it's the same in whatever city you know. The subway tracks block out the sun, instead of running under the streets. In the Old Port, there was the smell of the mills, reminding me always that we were way up the ass of the city. I've been squatting here for about a year.

“For the evening festivities, I remember us watching a few kids from Lincoln street paying some bums to fight each other.

“The things we put each other through.

“So, I remember Eric wondering if the city just wished they could pack us, the most desperate and destitute people, in close enough together, like dynamite, and maybe they'd wake up one morning, and we'd have all wiped each other out. Once the masses reach critical mass.

“I pointed out that we seemed to be talking about politics again. Eric apologized and said he didn't really know that much about politics. He said he tried to listen real hard when people gave him their opinions, tried to talk politics with anyone he met on the street. All he ever heard, he said, was, ‘there's not enough for everyone, and someone else is trying to get my share.’

“After a while, I felt it get a little heavy, so I try and change the subject, and I ask

him what his tag is. That's when he starts telling me about Fnord.

"Now that I think about it, I hadn't changed the subject at all.

"I'm told Fnord was born in neighborhoods like this. Throughout this state, I've discovered that you find these neighborhoods have streets named after types of trees. No joke, every street here is "Pine" or "Perennial" or something. They mix it up some, too, so it's not as noticeable, like I don't know what "Taiga" means. Dead politicians are bad news, too. Like Knox street? More like hard Knox street.

"But I always know where I can find an abandoned building by these names. I'm a real estate pro. It's like poverty is zoned for. So for the past few weeks I've been chilling at a dump down on Copse.

"If you've never been in an abandoned building, we go all out on the walls. Writing all kinds of shit like 'Fnord'. Some conspiracy shit, plans to blow shit up. Big, abstract expressionist swearing, so focused it turns corners, I's dotted with holes in the wall. Also: '(+)-himbacine: potent antagonist of the muscarinic receptor of m2 type with 20-fold selectivity toward the m1 receptor.'

"Haha, you see, you write something down and it sticks with you forever.

"Hey, Rudolph, you think this is tough on me? I *subsist* on worse than this. It's cold and leaky at home, too, bitch. You think you lock a guy in with just his thoughts and think it makes me weaker? Yeah, fuck you.

"Hey, you know there are people out there who eat cat food? I thought it was just an exaggeration, too, some of the liberal bullshit, but no, some people live from time to time on cat food.

"You know some people are starving because they aren't *marketable*?

"Eric and I would talk about that kind of stuff all the time. I asked him if he was a Marxist and he said he was disillusioned with that stuff. I guess he had taken the prediction of the proletariat revolution pretty seriously and was all disappointed. Marx was just another guy who made some big promises and skipped town. It's all right, I told him, Jesus had done the same with me.

"Eric asked me if I was Catholic. I said I should be, cause so long as you're Catholic you can sell your ass for dope and still receive salvation. Evidently Eric was Catholic and he started in saying that Catholic means "universal," so there's no reason I shouldn't have a shot at salvation. I said that even so, I was a little behind. He said that if God's really in charge, and this is official Catholic doctrine, then he must guide some of our actions. Salvation is given when God uses you, not when you try to anticipate God's will.

“I liked this idea. You never know who’s working for God.

“Eric said he was still holding out for Jesus. I guess there’s this thing called the gnostic mythology which holds that Jesus never failed to return to the Earth within a lifetime of his ancient followers. After all, Jesus is God and God can’t be wrong about something like that. So therefore *this is still ancient times*. All of history since then has been a trick the devil’s been playing on us to keep us from salvation. The whole world’s an illusion, they said, steering us away from salvation. Progressing toward oblivion. Meaninglessness. Babble...”

Did you notice that? It seems I can break Brian’s concentration just by changing the interval of drops.

See, the torture in water torture isn’t the impact. That actually brings a great deal of relief. But just as soon as that little shock wears off, tension starts building again. The tension is a result, perhaps, of the subject being able to feel when the next drop is going to hit.

*Pat—pat—pat*

You feel it, Brian?

“So. Eric and I got along pretty good.

“I don’t think I’ll ever forgive his bitches, though. I guess one found out about the other one evening and they got into this fight there in the basement with all our shit. Anyway, one of them picks up a little bottle of sodium hydroxide and throws it at the other. If you know about Drano, how you’re not supposed to get it on your skin, well this is like the active ingredient.

“But what do girls know about chemistry?...she burned pretty bad. *Screaming*. You have no idea how bad this hurts. When I was trying to brush some of it out of her face I got just a little pellet in my mouth and shit, did I yelp.

“At the hospital they finally moved her into a room around 5:30 am. We were spent and headed back to the place. But I guess the cops were curious why we had all this sodium hydroxide, a key ingredient in meth.

“So I get woken up to be robbed at gun point by the DEA. A guy in a bullet-proof vest is yelling at me, and pointing his glock, and *sweating*, and calling shit out to another agent roaming the house. This other guy has got a gas mask and gloves getup and he’s pushing deeper and deeper into the house, poking around our basement.

Looking like some kind of mutated coachroach, this chemical-equipped cop comes back a minute later and says just, “Well. I’m impressed.”

The cop that's been watching us gestures around the walls with the flashlight. "You know, this is a Fnord house."

"I turned to Eric, kneeling behind me, also under the gun. He leans forward and whispers, '*We must stick apart.*'"

" 'Hey,' the meatball cop yells at him. Shining him in the face with the flashlight, he says, 'You'll have a chance to talk.'

"Then the gas mask man points at him and says, 'You're Eric White!'

"...I've been lost in space ever since. Maybe you could tell me what happened later that evening?"

"Rudolph? I think it's your drugs."

The beating of water droplets continues against that head, going at whatever pace we want, and most importantly, leaving no external marks.

"All right, you want to know what Fnord is?"

*Pat, pat, pat...*

"Fnord is punctuation for spoken sentences.

"Fnord is fuck you and this weird bullshit you need to get off.

"Jesus, how long have I been talking? CAN'T I FUCKING GO?"

Say the magic word.

"You hear me? Sick.

"You ain't putting Fnord in a box. As they say, Fnord is neither particle nor wave, bitch.

He's silent for the longest period yet, indignant. Christ, I hope our truth serum isn't wearing off. You've got to understand, we had no idea what kind of drug tolerance we'd be up against here.

"Hey, you must be wondering where I get my groundings in theoretical physics, Rudolph. I'm glad I remembered to talk about Pepperill Books. Ever since everything's been made in China, the Old Port's had a lot of mills that are just darkened, abandoned buildings. One of them, down on Grove street, is graffito-tagged "Books", with an arrow to around back. You follow that, you reach the side entrance of Pepperill Mill. Inside, there's a factory floor piled with so many cardboard boxes that you can only get around

through very narrow gaps. Years ago, when I first wandered into the old mill, Payson told me I could pick through whatever I wanted. They were all full of books, each for sale at 50 cents.

Grandfatherly Payson and his dog Indy spent all day in the mill, which he had bought as a place to store his book collection. There were so many of these books that even the makeshift pen for Indy was half full of boxes. One day after school, Payson told me that Indy had escaped, and so I entered the empty cage looking for books that no one else had picked over before. I didn't realize at first that a lot of it was crap, like romance novels and shit, same as on the factory floor, and a lot of it I just bought because it was Indy's.

I say collector, but Payson was primarily a salvager of books. His sources were located all over the world, sending him their least loved books every month. I'd go from religious books to inspirational books to diet books.

Even if I did spend half my time reading romance novels, at least I can look back and say I impressed Monique. God, when I think about all those romance novels, I know we're in a second dark age. Instead of no secular information, torrents of worthless stuff, having the same effect.

“Fuck, Rudolph...and I loved Pepperill Books so much when I found it, too. All those dirty, second-hand, crappy books, like a giant yard sale, got me so damn excited. When did I cease to see the world as so fascinating--”

That was it. Our cue.

Just then the chamber floods with white light. Brian turns his head and squints. You can see for the first time that he's white, about five and a half feet tall, with blotchy skin and dreadlocks, the dreds gathered around the back of his head in a kind of pony tail.

I enter the open doorway, cameramen scurrying into positions around me.

“Congratulations, you said the word we were looking for. Again for those at home, the word was ‘cease.’ Haha, all he had to do was say ‘cease.’”

The crowd behind me laughs.

“Well, Brian, you were in there for quite a while. You feeling all right? We should have quite a settlement already drawn up for you, let me just undo those straps.”

Brian just watches me as I undo the first strap, the second, the third, while I make a joke about drugging him for free. No sooner have I loosened the last strap than Brian lunges at me. But in his disoriented state he merely flops onto the floor at my feet. Collapsed, a limp, soaked mess; human pulp.

“You fucker! Slut! You--gaaaaah—son of a bitch!” he screeches at me.

“They say America loves to hate me,” I wink to the camera.

More crowd laughter.

“Fuck all of you! Ass jackals! See you in Hell!”

“Yes, what else,” I ask, extending the microphone, soaking up all his raw emotion.

“I guess he’s said enough. Tune in for next week’s thrilling episode of 'Episode!' Up next, 'Sobriety Challenge!' ”