

BREAKDOWN

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The elevated magroad wound through the City's midst, humming in the rain with magcar movement, rolling in the dusk with headlights and taillights, wrapping the great towers in concrete onramp tributaries, mag-asphalted channels, and steel-pillared streams. It flowed uninterrupted—a great roaring, surging river of light—until in the road's ninth lane, a single magcar's engine died with the fading whine of a hydrogen fuel cell pump, the screech of a failing magnetic generator, and a drive module's whir.

Powerless, the magcar decelerated. Yanked three lanes towards the inside shoulder by the road's emergency magnetic shoulder coils, it began to shudder. The muffled roar of twelve lanes of magnetically assisted traffic, now suddenly distinct in the engine hum's absence, blew through the dying magcar's cabin—as did the frightened curses of the passenger: a severe, gray man wearing a cheap suit, polyester tie, and an overcoat against the rain.

Sidestepping desperately to avoid collision with the gray man's Neo-General Motor's Sabron, cars appeared from the mist, roaring at arm's length in narrow misses and near disasters at two-hundred kilometers per hour. Paling, the man cried out and clutched the dash. His shoulder blades stabbed against the seat cushions, his feet braced for impact—

Untouched, the Sabron coasted to a stop on the shoulder and, in the absence of the gravity-defying counterthrust of the magnetic generator, locked down against the road's ferromagnetic surface.

Engine silence wrapped the magcar's cabin like a shroud.

Unclenching his hands from the dash, for a long, grateful moment, he breathed in the musty ozone of fried electronics and listened to the beating rain and the splashing of passing magcars. A strained, stained man of fifty-four, he watched with weathered slate eyes as the rainwater trickled down the canopy in serpentine rivers, throwing reflections that undulated like cracks upon his face. Beyond the canopy, plastic-shelled cylinders of light and warmth flashed in endless procession; twelve walled-in lanes of people hurrying somewhere, anywhere—while within the man's belly settled the cold realization that he was stranded by the side of the road. He had no phone, and no one would be expecting him until it was too late...

It was his first time to City, the first time navigating City's magroad maze—he would miss the meeting. The meeting—a new chance, a chance to move, an escape from the bitter divorce, the alcoholism, and the not-so-veiled threats of his supervisor. In just two hours, at six o'clock, the presentation of his career—no, of his life—

I must do something, he thought, I must. The job...it's all I have... The drive-module...perhaps it can be restarted...

Trembling, the man jabbed the reset button, but the module languished in power-dead lassitude, mocking the man with its silence.

The man ran a shaky hand across a sweaty forehead...the meeting. Eighteen years of

preparation, a lifetime of positioning...then divorce, self-destruction...and now his chance, his one big chance. What do I do...what can I do?

The man eased back against the seat and glared at the instrument cluster gauges—meaningless to him; he'd always relied on the car's drive module. Technology was for geeks; he preferred an older, simpler time. Besides, there was no reason to drive yourself any more. The boxy, center-mounted, plug-in computerized driver piloted the vehicle for you. Divining the best route based upon computerized traffic reports and passenger preferences, it automatically factored driving conditions and route difficulties—calculating speed and distance and god only knows what else...but his was a cheaper model. He could have purchased the more expensive, upgraded module—complete with an extended warranty guaranteeing current coverage, additional features, and presumably better reliability—he wished now that he had gone the extra three hundred credits.

But he hadn't.

The rain tapped with heavy, accusing fingers upon the plastic canopy.

Maybe, thought the man, maybe the problem isn't with the module. Maybe the difficulty is with the magnetic drive...yes...yes, perhaps...but would he be able to identify and repair the problem in time?

The passenger door opened, bleeding warm air into the low damp grayness of the afternoon; the man eased out of the cabin and hurried to the engine compartment, clutching the overcoat to his neck, his breath steaming in the cold, traffic roaring by his shoulder. The hood gaped open at his touch, and he stared into its aluminum accoutered interior and shook his head, the rain dripping from his retro, though slightly shabby, gray felt hat.

Aluminum cylinders, aluminum squares, aluminum curves, and a gaggle of multi-colored wires and hoses; mechanical modern art, he thought, and just as comprehensible. "I don't know", he admitted to the rain, "I...just...don't...know." I was a fool to play mechanic; I don't even know what an engine is supposed to look like. I never cared, never wanted to know...until now. And now it's too late—and I'll be late...

Why today? The man asked himself. The damned thing could have given out tomorrow or yesterday or the day after tomorrow or on the day after that—why the Hell did it have to break *today*? Never trust technology, never, no, never... And with growing frustration, the man remembered past insults suffered at the hands of colleagues, the little abuses and mini humiliations, the power games, omnipresent deadlines...late nights in tomb-like buildings deserted except for the janitorial staff. Sandwiches eaten cold by the sickly light of a fluorescent desk lamp...

The man slammed the hood and, thrusting his fists into the pocket of his overcoat, stared at the twelve foot concrete retaining wall fencing the shoulder, studied the twelve lanes of traffic. If he could make the highway's service gangway abutting the far lane...perhaps, yes, perhaps he could phone for a ride... But no, there was no way through, not at this hour, and not for many hours to come. The road was a near solid ribbon of zooming magcars, wet shining headlights, computer-generated following distances, and split-second timings. It would be death to cross, suicide to try—

But the meeting...

The meeting was a scream fading in his throat, a slow crippling—a dying scream. His wife would know what to do. God, she always knew...but his wife was gone, and now the meeting was...everything. It's all...I...have...

Oh God, there must be a way...

The man slid back into the car's warmth, shut the door against the roaring of the traffic—again hating technology, so-called progress—straining to remember, wanting a drink. Perhaps his driver's basic training...yes, perhaps...but no, it had been a long time—too long. There was something...but he recalled only the fundamentals...the basics of the basic as it were. The fact that his car was a combination mag/anti-mag gravity canceling automobile equipped with a supplemental hydrogen fuel cell engine. That he paid a toll to the corporate government for mileage logged on government magnetically assisted roadways—roadways that, until now he had never used, never even wanted to use. That he paid in water costs for miles traveled on neighborhood roads...which could be damned expensive given recent shortages in the dryer states...

But magcars, the man raged, weren't supposed to break down, extended warranty or no—he had never even heard of a breakdown—

Staring into the mist, the man wished now that he had been a better student; he tried to recall something, anything that might be of use—but no, there was nothing. A phone, he should have taken a phone—but he hated the damned things...enslavers they were, devices of torment, persecution, control... He crushed the brim of his fedora between anxious hands—a relic from another, more comprehensible time. He watched as the downpour rattled like hail against the photosensitive plastic canopy. Glared beyond, to the un-scalable retaining wall, the ultra-mod buildings, ethereal in the rain, blazing into the gray sky like the bars of a neon prison...the road, twelve lanes of un-crossable magnetized, ferrous-embedded blacktop, running like a dozen silver moats between the man and his meeting.

I'm overreacting, he told himself, breathing heavily, carefully smoothing the wrinkles from his hat. There's still a chance to make the conference, still plenty of time. He watched as from across the twelve lanes a lone maintenance robot studied him with a blank silver stare. Perhaps the robot...

The man waved frantically. The robot waved back, its electromechanical face dewed in the mist, eyes glowing, aluminum-sheathed limbs beaded and dripping; it was a newer model. Bipedal, it was roughly and aesthetically humanoid in form and function.

"Hey!" the man shouted through cupped hands. "Do something—call for help!"

The robot continued to stare, its silver, industrial features inscrutable. Then it waved again and turned away. The man watched as it clanked slowly down the road's service gangway and then disappeared into the magroad's electro-mechanical bowels.

"Thank God," the man muttered to himself. The robot was going for help, and soon a car would arrive—or a van—or a mini bus—to shuttle him off this god-forsaken shoulder.

Shaking his wrist clear of his coat sleeve, the man checked his antique wind-up watch. Only 4:28. Still an hour and a half—minus a twenty minute drive. He would make the meeting now with time to spare—time to wash up, dry out, to gain back his composure—time to breathe. The man relaxed, the tension eased from his neck...his jaw... He closed his eyes and drifted back into the deep synth-leather cushions of the magcar, feeling the warmth of the cabin encapsulating him, enjoying the rat-tat-tat of the rain, the cloudy gray nearness of the winter evening, the smell of the plastic dashboard moisturizer, the gentle vibrations of the road that rocked him and lulled him with its rhythms... Maybe, the man thought absently, maybe just to kill time, I should rehearse my presentation.

If only they will hurry, please God, make them hurry...

It was 4:33 and the man began to fidget. A lighter flared in the cabin; stabbing his mouth with a cigarette, the man began to smoke, tapping for ash incessantly...tap, tap, goddamn tap... Nerves—a case of plain ‘ol simple nerves. Understandable though—he’d had a bit of a shock. Who would have expected a breakdown on this, the day of days...and in the ninth lane? Of all the blasted, godforsaken luck—

Cursing beneath his breath, the man stubbed out the cigarette and again checked his watch...4:41.

The man ran a sweaty hand across the clenched muscles of his jaw; the slightest frown crossed his face, slashed by reflections from the rain; his brow wrinkled and he felt the dampness seep from his collar and down the back of his neck. Nothing to worry about, he had a few minutes to spare. Damn robot probably got caught up in a repair or something—or maybe the call service was slow in sending the dispatch order for help. Could be almost anything, he consoled himself. They’d be here soon; surely they’d be here soon.

Squirming, the man stared out into the rain. A robot drifted slowly across the service gangway, scanning the magroad for signs of cracking and debris in the roadway. Briefly the man wondered how repairs were affected, debris removed—

The man pressed his face against the glass. Was it the same robot? It looked the same... Yes; it looked like the same blasted robot! “Well,” the man told himself, shaken, “what if it was?” It could have radioed for help...yes, of course. It wouldn’t just stand around waiting for help to arrive; it had a job to do, after all.

The robot waved at the man. Smiling tensely, the man waved back.

Minutes ticked by.

4:48...four-damn-forty-eight. And nothing. The man fumed. Maybe the robot hadn’t called...maybe the soulless tin piece of dung hadn’t understood. Maybe the man’s voice had been garbled over the traffic noise. The man felt a sudden thrill of fear. Jesus...oh sweet Jesus...please, oh please...No! No, that wasn’t possible, the robot had understood: it had nodded and waved. It had gone for help and help was on the way. Yes, yes it was. The man felt the rainwater trickle slowly down his spine; he shook his hat off with a curse, splattering the dash with jeweled beads that flashed in the passing headlights. Help surely was on the way...

4:52... another robot now...conversing with the first. Both looked at the man. Both pointed, their silver faces glowing in the lamps lining the gangway, their aluminum-skinned bodies taut and questioning in the waning light. They waved, gestured. The man felt raw rage bubble inside. Fuming, the man wished that he had the power to go, to drive, wished that they were standing in his way. He’d chop the little tinfaces down, that’s what he’d do—yes, he’d mow their little silver robotic butts like aluminum grass... No, he told himself. Be calm. Don’t upset yourself before the meeting; it will adversely affect the presentation. What was it that the guidebook had said? Oh yeah... “effective public speaking is a zen thing, a thing of beauty...you must deliver from an inner core of serenity...you must project inner confidence and chi...” Yes, he told himself, be zen. To hell with the robot; let it point—as long as it had called. Dear Lord, please let it have called...

5:01...a roaring behind, a passing, sudden motion up front: a tow capsule driven by a robot; a shiny silver and plastic vehicular miracle; a splashing of mag-assisted tires on the

shoulder. Rain slashing at the man's plexiglas canopy now, drumming, winding in rivulets. Through it, in smudged blurs of red, he saw the glare of backing taillights and heard the reep-reep-reep of a warning horn. The man sagged in his seat, feeling the tears start to his eyes, his hands shaking with relief. Finally. Thank goodness...it was here. He would make the meeting. He would salvage his career.

A robot sidled out of the tow capsule. Sloshing through the rain it approached the car and tapped on the canopy. The man smiled, nodded, gathered his briefcase and stepped from the car and into the storm. He would be safe now; his presentation would proceed on schedule. He allowed himself to watch with interest as the robot linked the magnetic tow bar to the tow docking port and infused the Sabron's electrical system with a magnetism that lifted the vehicle from its locked down position. The robot worked swiftly and with precision; each movement a silver blur, an exact and calculated expenditure of energy, a throwing of rainwater from its aluminum-skinned arms that fanned droplets across the chassis of the car. For an instant, the man forgot the presentation, the hat that he held in his hand, the rain that ran in rivers down his collar and over his skin, the cars that threw spumes of spray in passing. For an instant the man admired the technological purity of the robot, its single-mindedness of purpose, the exactitude of its mechanical hands, its electro-magnetic muscles. Then, it was finished, and for a briefness of time it surveyed its work with a critical eye, its metal hands resting on its metal hips.

"Step aside please," the robot said in a flat, mechanical voice.

The man started. Step aside? What did it mean?

The robot turned and, moving economically, opened the door to the cabin of the tow vehicle and slipped smoothly within the cabin. The man stared uncomprehending.

"What is it doing—?"

He bolted to the passenger door of the tow vehicle and pressed his finger against the access port. A red light flashed denying entry.

"C'mon, c'mon, open—"

"Step aside please," said the robot with increased emphasis, staring at the man through the plastic windscreen.

The man drew back involuntarily as the tow vehicle's drive module powered to life—"No!"

"Thank you," said the robot.

"No, wait!" said the man, pounding on the glass, "Wait, damn you; wait!"

The tow vehicle moved forward, pulling the man's magcar behind it. For an instant the man stared, his mouth agape. Then, shaking himself, he ran for his magcar and jabbed his finger repeatedly against the passenger side access port—red light, red light, red light—

"No, damn it. NO! Wait, wait!"

The magcar lurched towards the magroad. Dropping his hat, the man pounded his fist along the glass; flailed his briefcase against the locked door.

"NO, WAAAAAAIT..."

The tow vehicle and the man's magcar slipped neatly into traffic and, in a swirling of rain, accelerated. The man stood, dripping and screaming as the twin red eyes of the taillights receded. Dwindling, they were lost in a stream of receding red, like blood trails washing away in the rain... The man began to whimper.

"...wait...oh, please...no...no...no...."

Numbness settled over the man. The rain beat upon his bare head. The water ran cold fingers across his spine. He stared blankly at the road, at the twelve lanes of dashing lights, the half-seen profiles, and the swiftly moving metal cylinders—the river that could not be forded. The robots on the service gangway...there were three of them now, waving, pointing, gesticulating....

The man bubbled with a heat inside, a growing rage. He picked his hat out of the puddles gathering on the roadway and, whisking away the water, replaced it on his head. He checked his watch and saw that it was 5:10. Still time, he told himself, cursing the robots, there's still time—

Still time for...what? The tow vehicle was gone, as was his car. What now, the man wondered, blowing into his hands to warm his chilled fingers. "Think," he told himself, "Think...."

A ride...maybe he could hitch a ride! Maybe he could flag a car and someone would override their drive module, stop, and pick him up...take him to the meeting...yes, a ride, yes—

Hat in hand, he began waving to the cars as they blew past in metallic flashes. "C'mon," he whispered to himself, "c'mon, pick me up; pick...me...UP..." He tried to appear pleasantly helpless. It was sleet now, the evening was upon him. It was almost five damn fifteen and he had twenty-five point seven damn minutes in which to flag down a car—

Windows of light flicked past, curious faces, warm faces, faces with somewhere to go and the means to get there. Cold air washed the man's body, chilled the places wetted by the rain. Men, women, children, and old people rocketed by, bundled in their plastic and metal cocoons, protected from the elements, smug, satisfied, and dry. "Please pick me up; please pick me the hell up—"

He screamed at the cars; waved his arms wildly. A small boy flipped the bird in passing, and the man's hat was ripped from his hands by the slipstream from the boy's vehicle. Flitting across the twelve lanes and over the service gangway, the battered fedora was whisked from sight. He watched the hat's progress helplessly; he watched as it bounded and leapt and careened over the tops of the cars, kept aloft by jets of ripping air until it slipped over the gangway—

"Please, oh, please...."

Sleet mixed with snow began to powder on his shoulders; he began to shiver uncontrollably... "Oh, please..."

Walk, he thought. No...Run! The pedestrian bridges: yes, bisecting the magroad in regular intervals. They didn't reach down to the roadway, but what the hell. Maybe he could call up for help. But no...no, the bridges were relics, antiques, quaint unused bits of architecture from a bygone age—and it was sleet. They were probably deserted. "No," he told himself, "it doesn't matter." It was a chance, a small pathetic chance at best, but a chance none the less. Desperately the man tried to remember where he had seen the last bridge, how far.... Go forward...or back?

The man began to run the shoulder: arms flailing, briefcase flapping. To hell with it; the direction didn't matter. They were ahead. Yes, they are ahead; yes, they must be ahead... The breath was torn from his lungs in painful burning wrenches; his heart thudded in his chest and his arms and legs turned to fire. He felt the fat jog over the softness of his belly. "I'm out of shape," he told himself. Work, all I ever do is work, and

no, I never took the time to exercise...

No...he'd never make it. He remembered now. The nearest bridge had to be at least ten kilometers ahead. The cars streamed endlessly past, and he howled with frustration through his gasping, burning lungs. He slipped on the ice and slammed his knee into the hard gray surface, ruining his suit pants and skinning his palm.

Across the roadway, the robots gathered, eight of the damn things now; staring, pointing, grinning, waving, mocking....

"Screw you," the man began to scream, panting, "Screw you. I hate you, hate you, hate you—"

The man curled against his knee, sobbing. 5:41... he'd never make it; he'd lose his job...

It was over, over—

A terrible feeling of helplessness flooded over the man. It wasn't fair. He'd worked so hard; he'd put up with so much. Escape had been within reach...but now...

Now...nothing.

Nothing, nothing, nothing and he would be nothing, and he would have nothing, and he would always be nothing—

At his shoulder the road-river flowed ever on. The man drowned beside its banks, the sleet streaked like white, entangling wires. Beyond the gangway, City's business district lifted its towers and its lights in indistinct, unreachable blurs. The robots gathered; with glowing eyes the robots watched.

A scream strangled in the man's throat. He rose in jerks, slipping on the ice. His face was red, his wet, frozen hair plastered like grease against his balding forehead. He staggered on widely stretched legs and screeched obscenities at the robots. They stared with blank, metallic faces. They did not reply. Throwing his head to the sky, the man began to laugh, to scream—

Twelve lanes away they watched, eleven robots, now; eleven shiny expressionless faces. They turned to one another questioningly. They waved, called to him.

He slavered at the robots, spittle flying from his lips. Sleet pattered unceasingly against his bare head, maddening him, like pellets, like darts. He scratched up a handful of ice from the road surface. His arm flailed sideways, like a child's; clumps of sleet fanned across the onrushing traffic and scattered from their metallic flanks into a million crystalline flakes that spun in the slipstream. He bent, scooping handful after handful, tearing his nails, bloodying his fingertips. He stripped off his watch, heaved it at the gangway—

He threw himself into the path of the onrushing traffic, realizing even as he did so that he would die, that he would be crushed, smashed, broken. His feet hit the magnetic surface of the twelfth lane, and he spun off balance. He saw the car filling his vision like a silver avalanche—

It was by him in a metallic blur—in another lane. The car behind it switched lanes also, its drive module screeching. The twelfth lane opened around him, parted like a headlight sea that merged with the eleventh lane...

The man walked into the eleventh lane—cars swung wildly to the twelfth lane or the ninth lane and the eleventh lane cleared. Again the man stood alone on an island of asphalt as ahead the cars again merged into their proper lanes...

The man walked....and walked. Untouched. Across the unfordable river, across the

twelve lanes of the road...until he reached the service gangway. He turned, and looked back to where he had been. There on the gangway he stood; limp and pallid, the color washed from his face... He stared, his lips moving soundlessly, wordlessly...

"I...I didn't know," he whispered, pulling the words as if from a vacuum.

"How could I know?" he pleaded.

"It's not fair...."

"I...didn't...KNOW...!"

The briefcase fell from his hands, spilling its contents onto the gangway; a breeze puffed with sleet caught the papers and blew them onto the roadway. The man watched, defeated, empty-eyed, as outlines, graphs, charts, and business cards skipped like dead autumn leaves across the lanes.

Along the highway a myriad of drive modules registered the presence of foreign material on the road's magnetic surface and devised avoidance maneuvers, seeking alternate routes factored by the probability of imminent intrusion. The robots, changing the flow of traffic by their presence, trundled onto the roadway and collected the litter for disposal.

The man listened, sleet pelting his bare head, to the shifting roar of the traffic.

THE END