

JUSTIFICATION

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Dale Bently shuffled out of his apartment in his robe and slippers, squinting in the pale fall sunlight, heading toward the mailbox and the letter that would tell him his life was over. In one week it would be his fortieth birthday, and while he had that vaguely in mind, he had forgotten about what it meant. He had forgotten a lot within the past five years, his life becoming a pale blur of featureless days.

He opened the mailbox with his thumbprint and pulled out the small bundle of junk mail, not even seeing the envelope from the Bureau of the Census. He carried it back to his apartment and shuffled inside, the end of his daily trip into the world. He shut the door and locked it, and threw the mail down on the coffee table that separated the couch from the television. As the letters spread out he saw the bright red envelope and it caught his attention. He'd seen that envelope before.

It was easy when Dale Bently was five years old; he was a

child in good health and was getting good grades in school.

Children of his age were rarely judged poorly. It was the same when he was ten years old. By the time he was fifteen he'd developed into a bit of a disciplinary problem, but that was normal for a teenager and there was still no real worry. When he was 20 he was in college and getting good grades again.

By the time he was 25 Dale was making a good living as an apprentice engineer with Lagrange 5 Corp. It was the first time he'd seen the Census as a threat, but as he was actively working for the good of mankind and producing more than his share, he passed. The same when he was 30 and 35 years old. But then there was the accident, and the hospitals, and the lawsuit which gave him enough money to compensate him for not ever being able to work in high orbit again.

The money, officially, was for him to be able to reeducate and enter a new career, but as it turned out it was enough for him to comfortably survive without working for a considerably long time. He grew inward, reclusive, living for his daily and nightly television favorites. It never occurred to him, never at all, that he was dooming his very existence.

He opened the red envelope and held its contents in his hands. The Census! he thought. The damned Census!

Bureau of the Census

Dept. of Life Evaluation

Division of Judgment

Los Angeles, CA 90039-3278-34

Notice to Mr. Dale Bently of 7892634 Veracruz

Lane, Apt. 982e7, Tuleburg California

95205-1252-08, S.S. #578-23-8493-X-4398:

IMPORTANT! This is your 5 year census notice!

You must fill out the accompanying form and
essay and return to the Bureau (see enclosed
self-addressed envelope) before your deadline
of November 1st. Failure to complete or return
the census will jeopardize your status of
citizenship.

My God! Dale thought. My God, I forgot all about this! What have I
been thinking!?

He looked over the form and the instructions for the essay.

The form itself only counted for %10 of the evaluation. It was the
essay that carried the weight. In big bold letters the
instructions read:

In your own handwriting, justify your existence in 500 words or
less.

Letter held numbly in his hand, Dale walked to a window and looked

out. The white sunlight made everything glare in his eyes, causing him to squint. It looked so unreal, much less real than the television screen. There was no color out there.

Dale looked down at the letter. He looked at the date. November 1st, it read. He had one week.

#

The trolley rumbled and swayed over the old freeway foundations, steel wheels singing against steel tracks as it whizzed out of Old Town and into the vast spread of cityscape that covered the once vital farmlands. Tuleburg was now bigger than the L.A. basin, with Money and Business drawn around the big space ports like iron filings to a magnet. The sprawl of the California Central College campus was visible miles before the swaying green trolley reached the station, giving the impression that the trolley was barely creeping along. This was pure illusion, as they were traveling in excess of 70 miles per hour. Dale was standing, holding onto a rail and squinting through the windows, when the brakes were applied. He was thrown forward and would have gone tumbling had he not grabbed on with his other hand.

The walk from the station into the campus had him exhausted before he was anywhere near his destination. He had a headache and he was dizzy and his legs felt like they were going to collapse beneath him. The students milling about all looked impossibly young. He couldn't tell if they were 14 or 24.

One tower stood out from the rest. He entered and rested on a bench in front of the elevators for a while, mentally preparing himself for the interview. Almost five years ago Lagrange 5 Corp. had suggested he take up teaching --- he only hoped that it wasn't too late. By teaching the young, he could easily justify his existence.

His watch beeped and said, "You'd better hurry up, your appointment is in five minutes." Dale sighed, said, "Oh, shut up," to the watch, and wearily got to his feet. He touched the button for the elevator and the doors opened. He stepped inside, announced his destination as the 22nd level, and nearly toppled to the floor as the elevator swooped upwards toward the top of the tower.

On the 22nd floor, he managed to find his way to Virginia Mergle's office, which was a large hardwood door with a sign that read "PERSONNEL." Beyond was a waiting room with a large information screen in a corner and seats all around. A computer voice said, "State your name and business," as soon as he entered. Dale spoke up in a nervous voice, and the computer acknowledged him and said, "Miss Mergle will see you in one minute, seventeen seconds." The information screen showed several different views of the campus, a scrolling list of job opportunities, and a documentary on keeping full sized whales in captivity.

When the countdown to his appointment reached zero the door swung open by itself and the computer announced, "Miss Mergle will

seeyou now." Dale stepped into the inner office and saw a smooth-skinnedblack haired woman reclining in a chair behind a hugedesk. Her eyes were closed, and eight data cables trailed fromher head like an octopus's tentacles. "Come in, Mr. Bently , " shesaid without opening her eyes. Her voice had an unpleasant, too-relaxedquality about it. Despite her clear enunciation, it soundedlike she was talking in her sleep. "Please, sit down and relax."

Dale sat but he didn't relax. "I'm here about a job teaching zero-gravityengineering."

"We have an opening,"Virginia said in her sleep-voice. "What are your qualifications?"

"I have a degree in zero-gravity and low gravity engineering fromthe Tuleburg Institute of Technology, and ten years of practicalexperience with L5 Corp."

"Yes," she said, her eyes still closed. "I am reviewing your recordsnow."

Daleswallowed, his throat dry. Silent seconds passed while datastreamed in and out of the woman's brain. She breathed slowly, her breasts heaving up and down with dream-like calm.

"You have no teaching credentials," she said finally.

"I have practical experience, things that----"

"You have no teaching experience, either. I'm sorry, but I can'tgive you any teaching position at all without a degree. I am searchingfor other employment possibilities now."

Again, Dale found himself waiting silently and watching the

woman's breasts ease up and then down again.

"Your physical records indicate you would not be able to do any heavy labor. I'm sorry Mr. Bently, but I just don't have anything for you at all."

Dale sighed, and stood up.

"Mr. Bently, I'm curious. Your records indicate you have not been in any schooling nor work for years. Why the sudden interest in teaching? You could have spent all this time enrolled and getting your credentials."

"I don't know. I haven't been feeling that well."

"Your five year life evaluation has come up with the Census Bureau, hasn't it?"

"Yes."

"You need real help, Mr. Bently. Professional help. There are lawyers who specialize in life justification. I strongly advise you to see one."

"Thank you."

"I can recommend one in particular, if you like. His name is Vlad Breenwood. Here is his address and phone number." There was a whirring sound, and a piece of paper slipped out of a printer and into a tray.

Thanking her once again, Dale took the paper and shuffled out of her office.

#

Vlad Breenwood worked out of a small office in a backwater corner of Tuleburg's 8 story shopping mall. Vlad was a balding man in his fifties with a plastic smile and a jerky, bird-like nervousness about him. But his voice was strong, and he quickly convinced Dale that he knew what he was talking about. "You've really backed yourself into a corner," Vlad was telling him. "Something inane like, 'I think therefore I am' is not going to wash with the Department of Life Evaluation, especially considering you've become a 40 year old shut in. What do you do with your time, anyway?"

"I watch television."

"Do you ever take notes?"

"Notes?"

"What kind of shows do you watch, anyway?"

"Well, um, entertainment type shows----"

"Like what? Give me some titles. What are your ten favorites, ones that you never miss?"

"Oh, uh, Android Sluts, uh . . . Full Tilt, Onion Man, Goddesses of Lust, Zoo Keeper's Daughter----"

"No docu -dramas? No historic recreations? No educational programming whatsoever?"

". . . no, I'm afraid not."

"Do you have any hobbies? Do you build anything, like model trains or anything like that?"

"No."

"Do you watch birds, or keep an ant farm, or have a dog?"

"No."

"Nothing like that?"

"No."

"Do you pay anyone's bills besides your own? Are you supporting anyone?"

"No."

"Do you have any family whatsoever?"

"No."

Vlad shook his head, and got up and paced back and forth behind his desk. "We don't have a lot to work with, Dale."

"I know."

"There's only one chance. We're going to have to cheat."

"How?"

"I'm going to make something up for you, and write your essay for you. You're going to copy it down----"

"But I thought that----"

"Yes, it's true. They make you write it in your own handwriting so that a computer program can analyze it and determine if you're being truthful. That's the key, there, though: If you believe you're being truthful --- that is, if your subconscious believes you're telling the truth --- then you'll fool the computer program."

"How am I going to believe?"

"Well, it's tricky, and there's no absolute guarantee, but

I've had people hypnotised into believing their justification essays and they've passed without a problem. But the important thing you have to do even before we begin this is make a solid commitment to become a honest, worthy citizen after we get you past your five-year evaluation. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Okay. I'll make the arrangements, you work on positive thinking. I'll call you at your home when I set up the appointment with the hypnotist. Okay?" They shook hands, and Dale left his office feeling much better.

#

Two days later, Dale was right in the middle of the newest episode of Wide Open Beavers in Mexico when his phone rang and Vlad announced that an appointment had been made. Dale quickly wrote down the details and hung up, rushing to get dressed and ready so he could make the next trolley at the station.

It had been raining off and on that day, but at the moment the sun was shining through a hole in the clouds and the streets and sidewalks sparkled with water droplets. The world looked clean and fresh, and Dale took it as a good omen. It darkened again as he boarded the trolley, and was pouring down in god-awful torrents when he reached his destination. It was a small ground-level station on Harding Way, deep within the Old Town. Buildings of brick and concrete a hundred years old stood quietly crumbling

amid the hustle and cries of street salesmen. Dale passed prostitutes who had current wires braided through their hair and into their scalp, and skinny teenage boys offering little bags of pale blue powder, a drug called "Carny" which was actually the processed spoor of some South American beetle. "It's like going to a circus!" one told Dale. An Asian man in a black coat stood in a doorway, watching him, and Dale realized the doorway belonged to the address where he was supposed to meet Vlad.

"Hi," Dale said. "You work here?"

"What's your name?" the man asked.

"Dale."

"Come inside." He opened the door and ushered him through.

Dale was surprised, the inside looked like it had once been a church. There were pews and an altar, and discolored paint on the wall that marked where a huge cross used to hang. "You here to get a doodad installed?"

"A doodad?" echoed Dale.

"A pleasure interface." His eyes bore into Dale's own. "No?"

"No. I was supposed to meet my lawyer----"

"Okay! Sorry, my mistake. Right this way." He led Dale across the room and through another door. The room beyond was small, cluttered with piles of computer decks and peripherals, and had one large stained-glass window. In the corner was a chair with a skull cap attached, an old cerebral induction setup. "Take a seat, Vlad should be here any minute. I'll be right back." He left

and closed the door behind him, leaving Dale alone. Dale shivered.

It was cold and clammy, and smelled of mildew.

He sat in the induction chair and waited. Twenty minutes went by, and Dale was just about ready to get up and leave when he heard laughing voices and footsteps approaching. The door opened and Vlad and the oriental man walked in, stifling their laughter. It gave Dale the impression that they were laughing about him.

"Hey, Dale, are you ready?"

"Yes."

"Okay. Let's get started right now. Professor Aki here is going to put you in a simple Alpha trance and we're going to feed the essay into your subconscious. After we're sure it's firmly in your memory and your attitude toward it is very positive, you're going to write it out. I'll take it from there, and hand deliver it to the local Census office. And you've got a new start! Okay? Ready?"

"Yes."

"Okay. Aki, let's do it."

Professor Aki adjusted the skull cap and then turned to a computer terminal. He hit a few buttons and suddenly, against his will, Dale felt himself relax. Consciousness dropped away like a stone falling down a deep, black well.

Consciousness came back like a car slamming into a wall.

Professor Aki was still at the terminal, and Vlad was standing in front of him folding a piece of paper and slipping it into an envelope. "That wasn't so hard, was it?" he said.

"What?" said Dale.

"It's over. I've got the essay, I'm about to run it down to the Census for you. Now all we have to do is settle the account, and you're on your way."

"What was --- what did I write?"

"You wrote a very convincing report about your independent study of the value of modern broadcast television. You plan on writing a book about it, warning the public of the dangers of video sedation."

"I am?"

"Don't worry, you don't actually have to write it. You just have to get involved in something worth while during the next five years."

The amount of money Vlad wanted for his services was a surprise. It was over half of the money Dale had left in the bank, the interest of which Dale had been living on since the settlement with L5 Corp. In the end, though, Dale agreed that his life and citizenship was worth it, and he sealed the transaction with his thumbprint.

#

Several days went by in a blur, and one afternoon during an interesting repeat of Sexual Deviancies of the Rich and Famous there was a knock on Dale's door. He turned down the sound and got

upto look through the peep hole. Several people were standing outside, all in uniform. "Dale Bently , please open the door right now," one of them called out. It was a short, pretty black woman withher hair tucked up under her uniform cap. Her voice was very commandingand yet, at the same time, bored. It gave him the impressionshe did this all the time.

"What do you want?" he called through the door.

"It's very important that we talk to you."

"About what?"

His hesitation made her angry. "Look Mr. Bently , we have a Writ of Total Compliance and we'll burn through this door if we haveto. Do you understand that? You open this door right now!"

Dale opened the door. The black woman stepped quickly inside holdinga piece of paper, immediately followed by three men and anotherwoman holding clipboards. "By order of the Department of Judgement of the Census Bureau of the National Government you are herebyinformed that you failed the justification test as defined bythe United Order of Justification to Society, Articles IV throughXV, and your citizenship is hereby revoked for the cause ofconservation of energy and resources. Your property and assets arehereby seized for redistribution. You're ordered forthwith to surrenderyour physical existence in exchange for public social simulation." She took a breath. "You have three phone calls before weproceed. You can use them anytime between now and dissociation." She fell silent, waiting for him to say something, whilethe others went right to work writing out an inventory of

his possessions.

Dale said nothing.

"Okay," she said. "You can take your phone calls later. Are you going to come quietly now or am I going to have to cuff you?"

Dale erupted. "You can't do this! What gives you the right to come barging into my home telling me what----"

She sprayed him in the face with a small aerosol can and Dale's throat closed. The world spun and he pitched over on his back, reeling, making sounds like a startled cow. When his sense began to work properly again he saw a black corrugated rubber mat about 2 inches from his face. Groaning, blinking his eyes to get them to focus better, he sat up and saw the back of a chair through a heavy screen, and the back of a head. A red sign on the screen read:

ELECTRIFIED - DO NOT TOUCH!

He was in a police van, by the looks of it. His hands were firmly bound behind his back.

The van bounced slightly as it sped down a city street, the engine making an eerie electric whining sound. I failed! Dale was thinking. I failed the test! How could this have happened, Vlad guaranteed I would pass! Then a dark thought occurred to him: Vlad could have guaranteed anything he wanted, because if he was wrong and Dale failed the evaluation --- which he did --- Dale was in no

position to complain. For one thing, he was not a citizen anymore, which meant he had no rights, but even if he did he had broken the law. The Census agents would laugh at him.

The van came to a stop and the rear door popped open and lifted. To Dale's surprise, a bound and staggering Professor Aki was thrown in, and the door dropped closed and locked with a loud thud. The "professor" --- if he actually was a professor --- lay facedown and drooling on the mat. No doubt he'd been sprayed in the face with the same chemical they'd used on Dale.

"Maaawwnnpffk!" Aki said into the mat. "Yurrrraffffrekkkkssspkh!"

A half hour later, Vlad Breenwood, too, was thrown into the van. It appeared they had used more than the aerosol on him, as there was a singed hole in the back of his shirt and the burn marks of an electric stun gun. "You!" he said, after regaining consciousness. "You bastard!"

"Me?" Dale said.

"You bastard from hell! You data dump! I ought to kill you, you miserable cretin!"

"Refrigerate, man," Aki said under his breath. "Freeze it."

"To hell with you!" Vlad shouted at him.

"Keep it down or you'll get another jolt," the agent in the driver's seat yelled back at Vlad.

Vlad glanced at the driver, then backed down.

"What are you yelling at me about?" Dale said angrily. "I'm here thanks to your bogus letter----"

"Don't give me that you runty little rat-head! You turned me

in!"

"No I didn't! I didn't have the chance!"

The driver stopped the van and turned around. "One more word, one little sound, and I jolt all of you. Keep your mouths shut."

Vlad turned away, glaring at his own feet. Not a word was spoken during the remainder of the ride. When the van stopped, it was in front of the Pacific Avenue Euthanasia Center .

Dale was separated from the other two and escorted to a white-walled room where an attendant strapped him into a bed while an armed guard stood by the door. When Dale was fully strapped down, the guard left. The attendant was a kind-looking young man in a white medical jump suit, with long, curly brown hair and warm brown eyes. He prepared an injection gun and gave Dale a smile.

"So this is it," Dale said, his throat dry. "You're going to put me to sleep like a dog."

"No, that's nonsense. Think positively about it. It's not death, it's transition."

"It doesn't seem right."

"Don't worry, I have a lot of relatives in simulation. I talk to them everyday. They say it's much better than reality. In simulation, there's no pain."

"No pain." Dale was thoughtful.

While he was distracted, the attendant took the opportunity to use the injector gun against Dale's neck, right into the

jugular vein. Dale gasped, then lied there gritting his teeth. It hurt like hell.

Consciousness dropped away like a stone falling down a dark, deep well.

#

There was a large living room, much larger than his old one. There was a big, comfortable reclining chair, and a TV screen that took up a whole wall. There was no kitchen, though, and no bath room, and no bedroom. This was because Dale no longer needed any of them.

"The absolute necessity of conserving energy and resources forced society into some harsh decisions," his orientation counselor, Marilyn, had told him. "It was either outright genocide, or relocation of a large percentage of the population into simulation. As you know, it takes about 1/10,000th the energy and resources to support a person in simulation than it does in the outside 'reality.' No offense meant, but it was quite obvious to the Census Bureau that your lifestyle could easily be simulated ---and so, here you are. Your personality and memories recorded and kept alive in a computer simulated world." Which was fine with Dale, since all the latest TV shows were piped in directly, just like in real life.

Dale also found out he had been monitored by the Census Bureau ever since his accident, and that had been used by the

Census to setup and catch Vlad and Professor Aki. Virginia Mergle ,
the woman who had sent Dale to Vlad , had done so at the request of
the Bureau. "What ever happened to Vlad and the Professor,
anyway?" Dale had asked. Marilyn had told him that they were doing
time, right there in the same computer, in a simulated jail.

There is justice in this world, Dale thought, changing the
channel on his simulated TV.

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