

Easy

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***Author's note:** The author would like the readers of this piece to know that any similarities of characters and organizations depicted herein to actual persons living or dead or real organizations, is purely coincidental. The author would furthermore like to thank his editor-in-chief, Lindsey Collier, and his loving wife, Adrienne Landry Dunavin.*

“You are...Mr. Markson? Ah, yes – your payment is in order. We understand you come for a LEMP.” In his thick Russian accent, it sounded like he said *leemp*. It was a weird thing to come to an abandoned warehouse to discuss with a Russian gangster, this big electrical contraption. But maybe not the weirdest.

“Yes.”

“You understand what that means?”

The young man Mr. Markson's heart was pounding. “Scientifically speaking, I know what a LEMP is. Let's just leave it at that.”

“This will kill the nanobots, no danger to you. You are aware, though, that you won't be able to fully participate in soc-”

“Aware of it, yes.” *Understand it? I'll let you know when I get out West.* Aidan had handed over his phone at the desk so it wouldn't get fried, but then frying it would probably be the best outcome, since the SIM-3 card would give his location away.

We all begin the same way – blind, screaming, and coated in goop. Aiden Daniel Markson began this way on the morning of March 23, 2032. Aiden's first experience of the world he had entered against his will was a chilly draft, followed by random shouting, a chuckle here and there, some sobbing. A decent enough chap came along to wash the goop off, and then he felt himself floating into the comforting arms (or something or other) of some other thing with a soft voice and a nice smell to it; in fact, it smelled something like the warm viscera he was only moments earlier surrounded by. Aiden started to drift off to sleep after this welcome development, but his reverie was interrupted by a sharp pinprick.

About twenty-eight years later, a much larger and goop-free Aiden Daniel Markson plopped down into a dingy hard plastic booth in a downtown Vietnamese noodle shop. He knew what he wanted, so he glanced at the menu only briefly, and then stared vacantly past the backwards “B” in the window (the grade from the city health department – HIGH SODIUM CONTENT — SHARED RESPONSIBILITY PAYMENTS POSSIBLE and

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0001 HIXBOT ADP8144139812-000007C0
SEARCHING FOR CMS PATIENT CLOUD...DONE
...
0007 PROTOCOL INITIATED
0008 CHECKING SHIBBOLETH ...DONE
0009 PATIENT: MARKSON, AIDEN DANIEL
0010 DOB: 48296.6509606481
0011 STATUS UPDATE ID=0085746212857132
STATUS UPDATE 0085746212857132 IN PROGRESS ...
0012 INTAKE: KCAL=400, NA=1.31
...
0172 na_accum = na_accum + this.na
0173 msg -> "WARNING SODIUM INTAKE EXCEEDS THRESHOLD (days=91)"
0174 this.Patient.BP = reportBF(BP); echo "BP 131/85"
...
1378 switch {
1379 case ((sys > 120) && (diast > 80) && (na_accum > 2.91))
1380 this.Patient.prem = this.Patient.prem +
surchargeSched.diagCode("I10")
...1381 }
1382 msg -> "STG1 HYPERTENSION NOT MANAGED...
SHARED RESPONSIBILITY PAYMENT APPLIED"
CHECKING EMPLOYMENT RECORDS...
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ETHNIC/CULTURAL EXEMPTION being the apparent reasons for the grade), on through the condensation on the window and into the lights and cacophony of the endless city beyond. The shuffling of feet behind him jerked him back into reality.

“You ready?” The waitress managed to combine the alertness of a pen poised over a pad and the worldly disinterest of a Finnish graduate student majoring in architecture into a single set of body language without any effort.

“Oh. Yeah. Pho. Veggie. Spicy. Water to drink. Thanks.” Aiden’s eleven-hour work day was already melting away. He could feel the steam rising from his body. Maybe that was the kitchen.

The order was dutifully recorded and remanded to the kitchen without further comment. Minutes later, a steaming bowl arrived along with a glass of iced water. Aidan took a spoonful from the bowl. The warmth of the spicy broth radiated inward, along with no small measure of disappointment. What he really wanted was the beef. He knew, though, that salty beef would totally jack with his biometrics, and he couldn’t afford the surcharges for the fat and cholesterol on top of all the sodium. Also, beef – when you could find it – was terribly expensive. The fresh vegetables were an extravagance enough in the city, where there was barely any natural green to begin with – the sun didn’t shine directly down here anyhow.

Aiden liked this place because it was warm and brightly lit. It was almost like a Turkish bath, if the Turks were replaced by Vietnamese short order cooks and burned-out waitresses stomping out hour number 14 of their workday. Despite the clanging of pots and the occasional exclamations from the kitchen, it was a peaceful place; at least, as peaceful as this city got. The city bustled with commerce; it had better – all these people had rent and student loans and Medicare premiums to pay. Aiden was on his last \$100. His paycheck went through at midnight, and his last nanobot evaluation came out only moderately bad, so he was going to live a little.

The best way to eat pho is as follows: just as you’re about to cram a chopstick-load of noodles or vegetable matter or whatever into your face, form a sort of channel with your tongue that you pre-fill with spit as a protective film against the scalding-hot broth, which only compounds with the spicy burn. This Aiden did, sending another comforting wave of warmth through his body. Aiden contemplated that it might not feel so good when the Medicare nanobots in his blood stream had their say at the first of the month. A previous “live-a-little” experience had landed him in a meeting room for a talking-to about “team health targets”. This was a comfort food

kind of a night, though. No textured-soy-protein and dilapidated-subway-tunnel mushroom cabbage medley was going to cut it.

The heat was fading fast from the bowl, so Aiden slurped down the rest of the broth, put the bill of \$51.78 on his card, and hit the streets. An extravagance indeed, but being one of Uncle Sam's data jockeys had its perks. Discounts on the train, a One in a newer housing block that he only had to share with one person (a frequently-stoned freelance writer/Uber driver/data scientist contractor named Chandler), an hour-and-a-half train ride from the office.

Aidan put on his headset and waded out into the city's mass of humanity. Everybody either was coming home or going to their second (or third) gig. Aiden worked for the good old U. S. of A. and thus was really lucky. At least that's what he told himself – one of Uncle Sam's many complex and sometimes contradictory rules, for regulars like Aiden and sometimes even for the contractors, was that thou shalt have no other employer before him. Loyalty to the cause was big with Uncle Sam. That really sucked – some contract gigs might help pay down that massive student debt sometime before he died; it might also get him out of the apartment and in with a new crowd. He was sick to death of hearing Chandler “ideate” out loud through another gadget review, but then his gadget reviews funded his “medicinal” marijuana habit (and fake license to get same). Contracts were the way most people funded their lives in the city. You'd run into a guy who had an Uber-style gig processing property insurance claims, played music for advertising jingles as a session musician, and worked at a bodega hawking magazines. Or a gal who cleaned apartments, scrubbed transaction data for a big bank, and delivered pizzas.

However, Aiden's job paid for more room in this city than most people knew, as well as an occasional shot of moderately fresh vegetables that were grown in relatively unpolluted dirt. It also paid a healthy share of the Medicare premium; still not an easy feat, but others had it worse. There was a family of seven holed up in a Two on his wing because Mom had type II diabetes.

Aiden soothed this bitterness by thumbing up a selection of music on his phone. He tapped the line called “CHILL” in the music app and streaming into his earbuds came a selection of ambient, arrhythmic music that reflected the city around him, all over the place with no discernible beat whatsoever, but with a cool counterpoint to the chaos surrounding him. Brightly-lit ads everywhere; all the major corporations covered. People stomping off to work, hawkers selling things from small electronics to drugs to street food made from God knows what, a few sorry-looking souls standing around a trashcan

fire; occasionally, a Government poster LED ad showing people of multiple ethnicities exercising together, and a muscular Uncle Sam figure saying I WANT YOU TO SHARE THE RESPONSIBILITY - PUBLIC HEALTH MATTERS!

The music's only-partially soothing influence was promptly interrupted by two sharp dings, a couple of seconds apart. Text messages. *Crap.*

Chandler: dude wndrng if youd read pc about samsung quasar iv
b4 submit, dat thangs DANK

Brannen Tragen: I need you to come back to the office ASAP.

Aiden stopped and out fell a heavy sigh. He looked up toward the dark, overcast sky (not that a person could really tell day or night from street level, but it was also raining). He was about 30 yards from the train station that would have conveyed him back to his moderately lumpy bed, where he would agree with whatever Chandler said about his gadget review with hope (most likely vain) of going to bed early. He would instead use that train station to schlepp back to the office for what could not possibly be anything good.

Out West. Aiden's last two words to the Russian sparked a memory from college, specifically from one of the pointless humanities courses he had been mandated to take – Early Film History. He thought he remembered the TA saying that there was supposed to be some kind of romanticism embedded in this phrase; some sense of adventure combined with the thrill of anticipation. That was two hundred freaking years ago. No romanticism to be had here – All Aiden could feel staring back at the copper coils was a sense of creeping dread.

Four hundred fifty million people in the United States – ten billion people worldwide – have to eat. Well, they don't *have* to, but things tend to turn out badly if they don't. Just ask someone in the Royal Saudi Protectorate of Yemen. They each also have the right, in most cases, to occupy a certain volume of the three physical dimensions of space, of which Planet Earth has only a finite livable supply. Balancing these competing goals, it turned out, requires optimizing these two quantities.

And optimizing these two quantities, it turns out, requires that national governments make people live tightly-packed in cities and cordon off entire swaths of large interior provinces (the arable ones, anyway) to use as farmland. Government departments or large corporate contractors manage it,

and – *voilà!* – staple crops for everybody. Well, not exactly everybody. But most people. Most people who can work, anyway.

Somebody has to work for these entities. Fewer people *want* to work for them than *have* to work for them. The thirteen million people in the prison populations – the less violent ones, at least – provide a source for workers. Immigration – both legal and illegal – provide another source. Ten billion people can eat a hell of a lot of food, though, and so more farm workers were needed from somewhere. These are made up of refugees from the contract economy, the “sharing” economy; those who won’t – or can’t – support themselves or their families in the cities. Life is hard for these people, working 12-hour shifts to meet production and shipping targets in support of international treaties on food distribution. The Philippines didn’t meet its targets in 2051. The Filipino government – well, a different Filipino government than the one in 2051 – did miraculously meet them in 2052, having noticed three naval task forces flying the flag of the People’s Republic of China sailing toward Manila harbor.

So, yeah, the targets are important. Workers who don’t help meet those agricultural targets, can’t function in the urban gig economy, and don’t have (or can’t get) full-spectrum jobs can expect to live what relatively short time is left of their lives in squalor in stacks of shipping containers in some Midwestern shanty town or on the outskirts of a major city that would offend any Rio street urchin from back in Grandpa’s day.

Another aspect of this importance is that Uncle Sam and the factory farms offered inducements to subject oneself to this lifestyle – like the forgiveness of part or all of one’s student loan debt. More than a few people had to reach out for this carrot in order to spare one’s relatives (Uncle Sam had gotten quite a bit more aggressive about recouping its “investments” during Aidan’s lifetime) the stick of several hundred thousand dollars of debt.

The farm conglomerates offered another “perk” of sorts by not really caring too much about meeting employer “public health” targets. Not that they were really pioneers in the employee health space; they didn’t much care about actual employee health, either. Employee health targets were important – Uncle Sam liked to lead by example in this regard. Maintaining public health replaced the military draft sometime in the Thirties as the bellwether of public responsibility, and employers went to great lengths to make sure they were hitting their regulatory targets, especially if they wanted something from Uncle Sam. The farm conglomerates’ lobbyists had won the freedom to overlook these targets in the name of keeping (most) people fed and thus not rioting constantly. They provided the bare minimum of health care to keep you showing up to work every day, but life expectancy

for farm workers was a full six years shorter than for city workers.

But they didn't check the nanobots. Hell, the farms even took people who got them zapped. Tampering with them was a criminal offense – Federal property and all that – thus, the Russian and his clever gangster engineering arrayed before Aiden now. Aiden had made contact through Chandler's marijuana crowd, a friend-of-a-friend thing (maybe "friend" was the wrong word, but you get the idea). This little 50-millisecond EMP burst would cost him five thousand dollars, which was coming out of his future pay at the ADM-MB Corporation, one of the big food conglomerates. Really, they were quite understanding about the money, for a Russian gang.

There were other consequences too – who knows what would happen in 45 years when he got eligible for Medicare, assuming both that he lived that long and that such a thing still existed then, and there were no nanobots to monitor his health status or verify his citizenship. Or, if he got into any kind of scrape with the law. Maybe if he wanted to vote in an election at some point (ha!) or travel outside the country (which, again, was not really going to be a problem, given his future salary). Maybe someone would invent something that would make the world like it was in Star Trek. In this stifling economy, Aiden didn't see how.

The "reward" for all this pain was that his family – maybe even his little sister – wouldn't inherit all of the burden of his fantastically-expensive state-college education. Maybe they could maintain their halfway decent Two in a lower-crime neighborhood. And if his life was going to suck anyhow, it might as well suck with access to some decent Mexican food without having to hear about it from a carefully-coiffured fake-smiling middle manager.

"You wanted to see me?"

"Ah, Aiden. Please have a seat."

Aiden sat down in the deliberately-uncomfortable chair in Brannen Tragen's office. Aiden thought often about how he would describe Brannen to his family, or to Chandler. Aiden's grandpa used to say things like, "That guy really has a punchable face." That said everything that needed to be said, really. Brannen Tragen was well-loved by the senior management at CMS. You'd love him too if you had power, since he would never challenge or disagree with anything you ever said.

Brannen was, of course, impeccably dressed and his hair perfect, despite it being 8:00pm on a Friday night. His hands were folded over each other impeccably, and his pen was placed impeccably next to his impeccable pleather folio. A real corporate jerk would be carrying a tablet computer

To: Data Analytics Team
From: Tragen, Brannen
Date: July 17, 2060
CC:
Subject: Team Health Goals

Good Morning Team,
I just wanted to remind you that the cutoff for you to share in the responsibility to meet the team's health goal is next week. Please make sure that you have turned in any supporting documentation and supplemental justifications to accompany your HIXBOT scans before then.

Thank you to all who have helped us meet our second quarter goals! Your efforts have been noticed and are appreciated!

Regards,
Brannen H. Tragen, Director
Office of Enterprise Data and Analytics
Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services
United States Department of Health and Human Services

or maybe one of those Oculus holograph thingys with the glasses and the haptic glove but this was the United States Government, leading by example and cutting costs. “I’d like to talk with you a bit about our teams health goal, as it relates to your overall performance. Comparatively speaking, you have been in the bottom ten percent of most team metrics, especially stress levels and sodium intake. . .”

“Fifteen minutes to Columbia. This will be the last stop. We’ll take a fifteen-minute break and meet back at the bus stop.” The announcement was followed by the same two-tone beep you’ve heard in every mass-transit situation.

There was one guy like that in every bureau. Aiden generally got along with his coworkers. Aiden’s bureau was mainly responsible for collecting, cleaning, and analyzing the vast amount of biometric data coming in from the nanobots everyone was injected with starting back in 2027 and at birth thereafter. Aiden’s grandpa was something called an “actuary” back in the day that used to do something similar, using stone tablets or those vintage computers that took up three square feet on your desk and had all these ugly wires coming out everywhere.

Aiden was one of the data jockeys that processed and cleaned the data to let the next-generation AIs have at it, trying to find answers. The United States had lagged behind other first-world nations for decades in the area of population health. Life expectancies had been declining recently, as had live birth rates. Aiden and his peers were trying to do right by as many people as they could. CMS was funded on a war footing to try to find “the answer”, and “the answer” so far was that the people who could play along with the system and navigate reams of regulations without attracting the attention of the alphabet soup of law-enforcement agencies or being referred to the IRS could generally expect to live “normal” lives, or what passed for normal these days.

The problem with meeting population health targets, of course, has pretty much everything to do with the population, which is made up of pesky individuals who forget to take their meds (or who may feel uneasy about putting complex cocktails of chemically-engineered substances in their bodies, which may or may not have been tested in the presence of other such substances in the rush to make them available). They forget their doctor’s instructions, they decide they don’t need the doctors, or maybe they don’t understand the doctors’ instructions. Or they do understand but then they go out and smoke cigarettes and drink whiskey and eat cheeseburgers or

salty Southeast Asian dishes or do drugs because they feel or taste good and they're a respite from working two or three temp jobs just to keep up. The stress of keeping up was enough by itself to run many people, quite literally, into the ground.

The stakes are higher now than back in Grandpa's day. Aiden had a student debt of seven times what Grandpa had from the late Nineties, and Grandpa had worked for fifteen years to pay his off. The old man had worked in one specialized career his whole working life, and then one day he retired. Now most people worked two or three 'gigs' – temporary or part-time jobs continuously throughout their lives – as labor had become more commoditized than specialized. “Retirement” was what you did when you got too sick to work.

Also, the rest of the world had “teched up” to a minimum level of competition with the West. The ready availability of cheap labor worldwide caused prices to fall, and competition was cut-throat. Whole sectors would rise and fall like the breeze. People dug their fingernails into whatever work they could get. Some people survived, others not so much.

The tobacco part of the equation got taken care of when tobacco began to be treated as a controlled substance in the Twenties, and the government made the tobacco farmers plant food instead, and the conglomerates (there were two in America now after all the mergers, ADM-MB and CACG) bought them all out. Beef got taken care when the supply crashed due to needing room to grow food, with the result that beef became ridiculously expensive.

The rest can be chalked up to that old annoyance, “individual human behavior”, and that was what the nanobots were for. Every conceivable body chemistry metric was measured, recorded, timestamped, and sent through the air either to satellites in space or to hardened “data bunkers” in nearly every city of any size in America. It was then aggregated and sent to offices like Aiden's throughout the country, where eager college students (like Aiden once was) processed, cleaned, catalogued, and analyzed the data – looking for “the answer”. And, taxing the ever-loving crap out of people who didn't find it with “shared responsibility payments”.

Looking for thirty-five years, Aiden thought, and finding out jack squat. He was too anxious and angry to sleep on the bus to Kansas City. Looking for “the answer” took its toll on people. The nominal requirement was eight hours a day, an hour for lunch. Aiden didn't know anyone who stayed for less than ten, never mind going out for lunch. A half-dozen had quit; another dozen or so let go when they cracked up and started having spaz attacks. Nine of these, he'd heard, got jobs at the farms and had moved to one of

the rectangle states. The other three – one stepped out in front of a subway train, and the other two no one knew about.

Aiden rolled his head against the bus window. Now he was on the losing end. A century and a half ago thousands of men who lost another lottery travelled to Union Station in Kansas City, the same path that Aiden was now travelling, to be sent halfway around the world to die in a miserable mudhole somewhere in France or catch the Spanish Flu at a God-forsaken place on the Kansas frontier, all for the “common good” as well, and twenty-six hours on a Greyhound bus was a lot of time to contemplate the unfairness of it all. From Union Station, he would be conveyed to his new position as a General Farm Laborer I with the ADM-MB agricultural conglomerate, out of Dodge City, Kansas. Where, Aiden noted, there had been four meth-related murders last week.

The bus pulled into a Break Time gas station. The passengers, including Aiden, shuffled toward the door to get out to stretch or hit the restroom, as their bodies indicated. Aiden looked into the convenience store. No one else was there except the guy working. Not much traffic out here. A sign read *Send money home -- anywhere!*; next to it, *¡Enva dinero a cualquier lugar en el mundo!* There were three other languages besides – one East Asian in origin, another that looked like Tagalog, another appeared to be Hindi, all presumably letting their respective speakers know that they could send remittances home. Aiden turned back to the east, staring blankly down the desolate, mostly-unused stretch of old Interstate 70.

What the hell happened?

“Oh my God. I mean – this is not happening. This isn’t happening.”

“Jesus, man – I’m sorry.”

“What do I do now?!? I’ll never get another full-time job again with this crap hanging over me!”

“Dude, you got some skills. You could pick up some contracts, right? Everyone needs data scientists these days.” Chandler seemed remarkably calm about all this. Perhaps it was the reefer, but perhaps it was also that he still had reasonable prospects of not plunging his family into generational debt or working himself into an early grave at a factory farm.

Aiden slumped onto his bed, covering his face with his hands. rubbed his face and eyes a bit, and brought his head up to rest his chin in his hands. “The contractors have to meet their health targets. . . No. The farms. It’s the only way. Otherwise my family – my sister – will get hounded by Department of Education collectors. Hounded out of their home. . . Oh my

The CACG Food Production division
is hiring!
Need work?

CACG is looking for agricultural laborers to help meet the world's food needs.

This position sorts, trims, and inspects potatoes for defects to minimize waste of any usable food products. Performs other duties as assigned such as, but not limited to: Sanitation work, heavy labor to include lifting up to 50lbs, inspecting for foreign materials, recasing product, and housekeeping.

Position Responsibilities

- Must be able to work safely in a plant environment.
- Must be able to work within quality policies and procedures under Food Security Treaty provisions.
- Must be able to work in different environments and situations to accomplish production goals for private interests, government contracts, and to support the Food Security Treaty of 2027.

Position Qualifications

- Must be able to work all three shifts at the plant
- Must be able to wear personal protective equipment as required.
- Must be available for both scheduled and unscheduled overtime, especially around deadlines for government / treaty inspections.

Benefits include competitive pay, savings / student loan contributions, and no nanobot checks.

Apply today!

God. . .” He broke down sobbing.

“You’ve. . . got. . . *skills*.” Chandler seemed to think that Aiden could take a binder labelled SKILLS with him to the plant and that it would guarantee him a cushy office job from which to manage his data-cleaning contracts, performance art projects, and the coordination of advertising for his foodie blog. “You could get promoted pretty quickly.”

Aidan was pretty sure, though, that everyone who was going to be a Financial Analyst II was already a Financial Analyst II, and that more Financial Analyst IIs were not really needed. Unless Financial Analyst IIs were somehow more nutritious than rice, soybeans, wheat, or corn.

“If you’re worried about the HIXbots, dude. . . I know of a guy who turns them off. And don’t worry about it – the government won’t get you in trouble if you ever come back to the city; they’ll just inject you again. They want to get in as many people as possible.” This was a nice thing to say, in Chandler’s own addled way, but there wasn’t any coming back.

“I’ll. . . I’ll never see them again. I can’t face them. . . I failed them. I failed them so hard. . . I failed. . .” The sobs came heavily now, and Aiden’s face fell back into his hands.

The shutting of the side room’s door snapped Aiden out of his reminiscence. There was probably some twenty-four-letter German word that conveyed how he felt right now, a feeling of washing out in life topped with the desire to stab his old boss in the face, and served with a generous side of anxiety. A shadow appeared in the frosted glass of the door. It was the Russian, or so Aiden assumed; his arm and hand were formed in a thumbs-up gesture.

Aiden took a deep breath, lolling his head back and forth, focusing on a mote of light coming from a hole in the rotting warehouse ceiling. He wasn’t really prepared for the whole creeping dread part of this.

A low thrum began to build to a high-pitched whine. The lights that weren’t already broken flickered and dimmed.

Aiden looked down at the button. It resembled an old child’s toy. There were soft pink cracks in the color, like the surface of a slightly-squashed gumball. Two wires ran out of the bottom of it to the Localized Electro-Magnetic Pulse generator at the other end of the room. There were letters on the button. No, a word.

The word was **EASY**.