

The Weight of the World

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Tom Greenvale hurried to get to get back on his feet before anyone saw that the chair had collapsed beneath him. It was obviously an old chair, one of the few left in the building. In fact, Tom mused, he was probably one of the last people to actually use chairs. Maybe even the last.

After ten minutes, he was finally upright, propped against the wall, trying to catch his breath. He was fortunate that, at a shade under seven hundred pounds, he was one of the slimmer people in the company. Otherwise, he could have been laying there for several minutes until someone noticed him. And if that happened, he could just imagine the admonitions from those who came to his rescue. “Why don’t you use a device? If you had a device, this wouldn’t have happened.”

Of course. A device. The full commercial name was “assisted mobility device”, but no one used that terminology. Probably because the implication – that you needed “assistance” to get around – still carried a bit of embarrassment with it. At least to Tom it did. Although, he was starting to doubt that anyone else cared anymore.

Slowly, he trudged his way across the floor of the building. It truly was a floor – a massive, wide-open space, mostly uninterrupted by cubicles or workstations. Instead, everyone whizzed around on their motorized devices, with their workstations neatly held in place in front of them on a titanium bracket. There was no need for offices; everyone just found a space to their liking and parked there to work. Meetings could be conducted simply with everyone circling their devices together. And if you ever needed privacy, a translucent soundproof screen could be generated around you with a tap of the finger. They had grudgingly made an exception for Tom; allowing him to have a modest cubicle and desk at a far corner of the building. He knew they were waiting for the day when he finally “got with the times”, and settled himself into his own device, at which point he knew his cubicle would be dismantled overnight. He hoped he could postpone that day as long as possible.

Tom looked up to see his colleague Martin Brooks rolling towards him. Martin was average size, about eight hundred and fifty pounds, with a thick beard and rapidly thinning hair. It was a Thursday afternoon, and Tom was in the mood to start winding down, as they headed into their standard four day weekend. He hoped that Martin didn’t want to start a detailed conversation.

“Tom,” he called out. “Can you make any sense of this?” He flashed up a display which floated in mid-air between them, containing what appeared to be a specification for the latest product the marketing folks had come up with. Tom had heard about it; it somehow tied the premium rates to a sequenced DNA sample.

“Sorry,” Tom replied. “Not working on that project.”

“Damn.” Martin took a long sip from the medium-sized one-gallon Coke that sat on his desktop.

“You know,” Tom said, “they tried to ban those drinks at one time.” This was how most of their Thursday afternoon conversations got started. Tom, who was a ravenous history buff, would recount some event that he had recently read about. Martin would respond by making disparaging remarks, but they both knew that Martin secretly loved learning a thing or two from his more cultured friend.

“You’re kidding me,” Martin replied. “Who the hell had that idea?”

“The Mayor of New York City, actually.” Tom was referring to an abortive attempt by Michael Bloomberg to ban large-size soft drinks.

“Huh. That was a long time ago.” Which was true, since it had been over a decade since Congress had legislated that metropolitan New York break away and re-enter the union as the sixty-first state. “I’m glad those nanny-state days are over and done with,” Martin declared, as he reached into the tub of Mars

bars beside him, grabbed two, and popped them both into his mouth at once. “That is the taste of freedom, my friend.”

That was the other thing that stood out about the office. There was food everywhere. Huge bins, every twenty feet or so, filled with every matter of confection imaginable – chocolate bars, potato chips, flavored nuts, you name it. There were, of course, the occasional buckets of oranges, apples, and bananas, but they weren’t as popular, and thus fewer and further between.

Tom nodded in half-hearted agreement, and grabbed a handful of corn chips from the nearest container. It was almost force of habit for him. He wasn’t hungry, but the ready availability of it made it hard to resist. Food was everywhere. It was impossible to escape.

And it wasn’t just at the head office of the Coulex Life Insurance Company, where they both worked. Every building, public or private, contained buckets and baskets of food and snacks, free for the taking. Eating had almost become as commonplace as breathing – it was just something you did, compulsively, without even thinking about it. It was no wonder that everyone weighed several hundred pounds, and the vast majority relied on mechanical devices to cart them around.

How it got to this point was an interesting case study. As the genetic modification of food evolved over time, it eventually became possible to produce huge amounts of produce in a fraction of the traditional time and space. What used to take a whole growing season and several acres of land could now be produced in a week, on a patch of engineered ground the size of a small table.

The immediate result of this was obviously a boon for the planet. World hunger was eliminated, as massive amounts of cheap and plentiful food were shipped to developing countries, who soon afterwards adopted the technology themselves and became entirely self-sufficient. Huge tracts of land, formerly dedicated to farming, were reinstated as green spaces, much to the applause of environmentalists everywhere. As the cost of food production plummeted, huge supplies were made available to the public, often free of charge, in what seemed to be a never-ending supply.

But something else happened, particularly in North America. People began eating the food. Lots of it. In time, the average weight of the population began to accelerate. And rather than trying to address the issue, the response seemed to be to accommodate it. Put everyone on wheels, construct nothing but single-story buildings, and keep the food coming.

The whole concept of being “fit”, Tom would come to realize, was simply a long-gone fad. Up until the start of the twentieth century, it was actually fashionable to be overweight. It was a sign of prosperity – if you were wealthy enough to eat, you wanted show it. There were even “fat men’s clubs” around the country in the 1910s and 1920s. But as the century progressed, there was more and more of a focus on healthy living. People worked out, watched their diets, and attached a social stigma to being overweight. That lasted for quite a while, but when food supplies began to ramp up and outstrip traditional demand, there was a definite shift in attitudes. Being heavy was fashionable again, and the concepts of fitness and exercise were very quickly forgotten.

In fact, weight gain even became a path to celebrity status. Just about everyone remembered an individual by the name of Damon Neufeld, a mechanic from Gulfport, Mississippi, who publicly declared that he wanted to be the first person to weigh one ton – two thousand pounds. As it became more and more apparent that he might meet his goal, Neufeld became a worldwide sensation. Millions of people watched his daily weigh-ins, broadcast live, and even took bets on how much he had gained in a particular day. When he finally topped out at 2,003 pounds, he was arguably the most famous person on the planet, and there was even talk of running for president in the next election. Unfortunately, he died of a massive stroke shortly afterwards, but not before he spawned hundreds of imitators. Being extra heavy became a status symbol.

Tom left the office a bit later that afternoon, and made the long trek to his apartment a couple of blocks away. He was pretty much forced to walk everywhere; public transit was almost exclusively geared to device users. All they had to do was indicate where they wanted to go, and they would be fed into a coordinated series of transit lanes, whipping along at speeds previously only achievable with cars and buses, back when such things used to exist. Apparently most riders used their transit time to take a nap. Or have a snack.

Tom reached his apartment and, almost out of habit, immediately headed for the walk-in fridge that was now standard in most dwellings. He grabbed a small stack of prepackaged meals – an assortment of chicken, beef, and the occasional – but rare – vegetable, and dropped it onto the kitchen table, where a built-in microwave system cooked it in a manner of seconds. Nobody actually seemed to create their own meals anymore – in fact, why would they, if plentiful supplies of prepared meals were readily available? His kitchen had no stove or oven, and he didn't even know where he could find them in the unlikely event that he ever wanted to purchase one.

He settled onto the couch in the living room, and flipped on the television. He was hoping to find a documentary or something educational, but he had pretty much watched everything interesting that was in rotation, and was left to watch one of those horrifying Hollywood movies. There were no actors or actresses anymore – instead, all human activity was generated by computer imagery, and of course they were all in perfect physical condition, because movies were supposed to be a means of escape, and nobody wanted to watch characters on the screen that looked like they themselves did. Unfortunately, nobody had quite figured out how to accurately program human emotion, so almost all the films now being produced involved superheroes, comic book characters, and space travelers. By Tom's calculation, it had been thirty years since a film was released that required intelligent thought on the part of the viewer. But he kept those opinions to himself, lest he be accused of being an "elitist".

There were no sports to watch either. Baseball, football, basketball, and hockey had long since disappeared; anything requiring physical ability was simply no longer feasible. Competitive darts seemed to still have a following, but Tom found it was hard to watch that for more than ten minutes. He eventually settled on an old gangster movie he couldn't remember having seen before.

His thoughts kept wandering back to the brief conversation with Martin that afternoon. What puzzled him was the notion that, for quite a long time, society had an interest in keeping people healthy, as least as far as "healthy" was defined back in those days. Then, for some reason, it stopped. Tom suspected that, as civilization entered what was called the "golden era", they didn't think it was necessary anymore.

They actually did call it that – the golden era. Not only was world hunger finally eliminated, but scientists at the same time began to finally find a cure for cancer, bringing that most dreaded of diseases under control for the first time. There was a wave of optimism that, finally, human suffering could be eliminated, and longer life spans could be expected for all. And yet, where did they end up? With an overweight, sedentary society, were people didn't seem to live much longer than they used to. It didn't take long for any references to the so-called golden era to be quickly forgotten.

So what happened? And why weren't people living longer with all the scientific medical advances they had seen? Tom wanted to understand, but none of the information he could find really addressed the issue. Instead, it was as if everyone gave up caring. It was bizarre. He remembered seeing an ancient movie called Wall-E, where humans had become grossly overweight through inactivity. Everyone thought it was funny at the time, but it turned out to be quite prescient. No one mentioned that movie any more, by the way.

The question kept coming back to Tom. Why had things turned out this way? Why weren't people living longer? Who understands this stuff? Then it occurred to him. Maybe his company's actuaries would have an idea.

Tom quickly put that idea out of his mind. Nobody got to speak to the actuaries; they operated in virtual secrecy, at some unknown location, hidden away from the rest of the company, ostensibly to ensure that their proprietary information stayed that way. But, based on what little information Tom had on them, they seemed to be the ideal individuals to answer these questions that were plaguing him.

Perhaps he could find a way to get in contact with them. Tom spent the rest of the evening trying to figure out how.

It was later the next week when Tom finally had a plan. He would claim that, in order to properly implement a complicated product feature, he would need to speak to them directly. He doubted that anyone had ever made such a request, so maybe he could get lucky.

Tom arranged a meeting with Ivan Frank, the vice president of product development, to see if he could make something happen. They were scheduled to meet at eleven in Ivan's office. Senior executives, as it turned out, could still have walled offices if they requested it; almost all of them did. Tom had met Ivan a few times before. He found him to be approachable, even if he always didn't seem totally candid. And, like most of senior management, Ivan was huge, easily topping a thousand pounds. There seemed to be a direct correlation between physical size and level of responsibility in this company.

"Come on in, Tom." Ivan greeted him with a sincere smile. He was seated on what looked like a flatbed trailer. Behind him were an array of monitors and other important-looking devices. Senior management was required to be constantly monitored for any physical problems, so corrective action – whatever that was – could be taken. "What can I help you with today?"

"I'll get right to the point, Ivan. I would like to meet with the company's actuaries."

Ivan's first response was a laugh. "Whatever for?" he asked.

"I really need to understand how the DNA sequencing interacts with the rate structure, and I can't quite get the technical details from your product managers." Yes, he lifted this idea from his earlier conversation with Martin, and it was completely made up, but Tom figured he could get away with it.

A look of concern crossed Ivan's face. "Well, we normally don't have the rest of the head office staff interacting directly with the actuarial team." He was interrupted by a loud beeping coming from one of the machines hooked up to him. Turning to the machine, he scowled, reached over, and turned it off.

Tom persisted. "Yes, I realize that, but given the complexity of the problem, the risk of us making serious mistakes in the implementation are quite high."

Ivan paused, and took a large bite from a submarine sandwich sitting beside him. "Okay, but I will need to get special dispensation for that."

Now that was weird, Tom thought. A vice president in the firm needing to get special permission so that he could talk to another department? "Do you think that will be a problem?"

Ivan shrugged, and then leaned over, at least as far as he could. "I've never asked. No one ever gets to speak to the actuarial department directly, at least not face-to-face. I don't know if I can promise you anything."

Tom left their meeting somewhat confused. He had no idea where there would be so much secrecy. What were the odds that he could get his meeting? And if he did, would there be recriminations for not being truthful in what he wanted? He began to think it wasn't that good an idea after all.

After waiting for a week, Tom was about to give up on his request, assuming that it had been rejected by the powers that be. And then, on a Tuesday morning, a response – yes, he could have his meeting with the actuarial department, provided he agreed to a handful of nondisclosure agreements. This made his pending visit even more enigmatic, but at least he would get his chance.

The meeting was scheduled for the following Friday. The actuarial department was located offsite; Tom had to go through the painful exercise of locating one of the few unused devices in the city and hiring it for the day. After an uncomfortable twenty minutes journey, he was deposited outside a dull, anonymous building that looked more like a warehouse than an office.

He made his way to entrance number three, marked by a plain metal door with no lettering. Once inside, he found a small alcove. Behind a pane of glass sat a bored-looking security officer, who could barely deign himself to look up. Tom looked straight ahead for the requisite eye scan – the now standard mode of identification – and the guard flipped a hidden switch, opening the door to a second room. “Wait there,” he grumbled, those being the only two words he would utter that day.

Tom entered and took a seat along a long, wide bench. This appeared to be a slightly larger waiting area, with a door at the opposite side. He wondered if this was one in a series of security checks; if so, he hoped they would at least be a bit more thorough. There was no activity for three long minutes, until he finally heard some motion on the other side of the opposite door. It opened, and Tom saw a figure emerge that scared the hell out of him.

A word entered his head, and it was a word that he didn’t think he had ever used before. The word was cadaverous.

The man coming towards him was unbelievably thin, weighing no more than a couple of hundred pounds by Tom’s calculation. He wondered if there was something wrong with him; if he was suffering from some horrid disease. And then it occurred to Tom – this is how people used to look. But it was something he had only seen in classic movies; seeing it in person was jarring.

“Hi. My name’s Paul Flynn. I’m an actuary.” He offered a handshake. He appeared to be in his mid-thirties.

Tom tried not to look rattled. “Pleased to meet you,” he responded.

“No device?” Paul offered a friendly smile as he asked.

Tom shrugged. “I guess I’m a bit of a holdout.”

“All right,” Paul responded with a laugh. “Come on in.”

They stepped through the door, and Tom was only slightly less shocked by what he saw. It looked like a standard office space, but everyone there looked like Paul – in other words, deathly, unhealthily thin. He immediately felt that everyone would stop and stare at him, but they kept laboring away at their tasks as if nothing was out of the ordinary.

Paul led them to a meeting table at a quiet end of the floor. “Can I get you a coffee?”

“No, nothing for me.”

“I know this must look unusual to you.” Paul’s comment seemed to come out of nowhere.

Tom stammered slightly. “You mean – uh – what?”

“How this looks. Or, rather, how we look. I know this isn’t what you’re used to seeing.”

“No,” Tom replied, “not at all.”

“It is a collective choice we made,” Paul replied. “Part of the reason we operate in a separate location. Most people wouldn’t understand.”

“I don’t think I understand,” Tom replied.

As they spoke, Tom saw another individual enter from the waiting area. He appeared to be normal size, but then Tom watched as he undid a long zipper down the front, and stepped out of what turned out to be a disguise; a costume that made him look several hundred pounds larger than he actually was. In reality, he was just as incredibly slim as everybody else in the room.

“They told me you had a question about the DNA sequencing, but I suspect that wasn’t entirely true,” Paul continued.

“You’re right,” Tom replied. “How did you know?”

“Because that sort of information could be discussed through the normal channels. You don’t need a face-to-face meeting. So you must have something else you wanted to find out about.”

“That’s right. I do.”

“So what can we help you with?”

“It’s really a simple question, when it comes down to it,” Tom continued. “It all has to do with life expectancy, which I think you guys have a good understanding of.”

“That is our job.”

“So when we finally found a cure for cancer, I would have thought that life expectancy would start to dramatically improve. Instead, from what I can tell, no one seems to be living longer than we did in the past. And the emphasis on fitness, well, it just disappeared. And I think there has to be some connection to all this, but I can’t piece it together. Am I right, or am I just missing something?”

Paul smiled. This was evidently in his area of expertise. “You’re very perceptive,” he said, as he called up a graphic that floated in the air between them. “This illustrates exactly what you’re talking about.” It showed the progression in estimated life expectancy, and as Tom suspected, it was pretty much a flat line. “We used to see steady improvements in life expectancy, and when we found a cure for cancer, that was expected to accelerate them even further. But that would have caused a huge problem for a lot of people.”

“In what way?”

“Just about every pension plan in the country would have ended up insolvent. Not to mention social security, which was already on a pretty weak footing. More people living longer meant more pension benefits that would need to be paid. And that simply wasn’t going to work. So, as a public policy measure, there was a strong desire to – how do I put it – manage expectations.”

Tom started to see what he was saying. “So there was a de-emphasis on staying fit? On purpose?”

“Pretty much. With the explosion of cheap and plentiful food, it seemed like a perfect storm. So rather than focus on staying fit, the focus turned to staying out of shape. One thing could pretty much offset the other. And, as you can see, it worked,” Paul said as he gestured at the graph.

“But what about you guys?” Tom asked, as he waved his arm across the room.

“I guess you can say we studied the numbers a lot more closely than anyone else. And because of that, we made a conscious decision to be a lot more moderate in our consumption. Which explains the secrecy. As I said before, most people wouldn’t understand. But I think you do.” Paul was looking right at Tom.

Yes, Tom did get it. He realized that, even though it was a noble cause to eliminate the diseases that plagued humans throughout history, you eventually had to die of something. And so, the tradeoff was to encourage a society where everyone was grossly overweight, which essentially neutralized everything else. And they had all fallen for it. Tom realized that he had fallen for it too, and his principled stance against using a device really meant nothing. It felt like he, and everyone else, had been played.

A wave of sadness fell across him. “Thank you for your time,” he said to Paul.

“My pleasure,” he replied.

Tom stood to leave, but before he did, he had one more question. “Are you sure you’re right?”

Paul tilted his head. “What do you mean?”

“You actuaries have made a decision to stay in shape, much like the way everyone used to be, presumably to enjoy a longer life. But are you sure things will turn out that way?”

“I’m pretty certain,” Paul replied.

“But how do you know?”

Paul leaned forward, and spoke in a whisper. “Because I’m 138 years old.”