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Finalist - In an Undefined Dystopia

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**In an Undefined Dystopia,
Bradley Becomes Both/Either More
And/Or Less Than Himself**

Sebastian Brady

“Any unit receiving a cumulative rating of 140 or higher will receive an entrance ticket.”

It was terribly exciting.

Perhaps it wasn't precisely what Bradley had wanted to choose, but, nonetheless, it was terribly exciting.

His father and mother hadn't pushed him into it, and neither had his friends. Everyone around him had been adamant that he make his own choice.

“You know we'll love you no matter what, right? Right? Right, Bradley-bear?”

“Bradley, you're a fine, young, autonomous individual, and whatever you decide will be a good choice. We believe in you so much. We just want you to

be happy. You understand that, don't you? Don't you?
Don't you, Bradley?

“Dude, it's yo thing, y'know? You do you, and
Imma do me, and then we gon' see. Hah. Hit this shit.
Hit this shit. Hit this shit, pussy.”

It was like being slowly crushed to death by the
warmest, most tender hug Bradley could imagine.

But, when the time came and he brought
everyone together, swallowed, blinked, smiled, and
announced his happy, hopeful decision to undergo the
rating process, he was positive that he had seen a sigh of
relief in his mother's eyes, and that his father's handshake
had been a little firmer and a little longer than normal,
and that his friends' fist bumps had been conspicuously
tender. These details, whether real or imagined,
confirmed his suspicions *vis a vis* the conditionality of
unconditional love (though he vaguely acknowledged
that this confirmation was really no confirmation at all;
he had never actually tested the unconditionality of his
parents' love by doing something wrong). He felt certain
that those around him were simply congratulating him

on, yet again, making the right choice for those around him.

For this was the right choice, insofar as anything could be deemed “right.” His family and his neighbors and his teachers and his grocers and his local congressman had all done it. They all seemed happy. The one person he had heard of who had chosen not to undergo the rating process, the friend of the older brother of a friend of a friend of a friend, had not been heard from since, and was, presumably, very unhappy. And he hadn’t even noticed any change in his older friends when they all went through it. So why shouldn’t he?

Beyond this anecdotal evidence supporting his choice, Bradley also knew that the rationale behind the whole process was so logical that he couldn’t second-guess the necessity of such a choice. In order to ensure that society remained productive, harmonious, tranquil, and happy, each individual wanting to enter into it had to submit to the rating process. It simply ensured that no diseased or inadequate individuals spoiled society for

everybody else. Of course, no one *had* to go through the evaluation process. It was *always* a choice. If one wanted, one *could* remain on the fringes of society, where one *could* work as a gravedigger, *constantly* burying the organs of those individuals receiving a cumulative rating of less than 140. It was *only* if one wanted to interact with others that one needed to submit to evaluation, and *only* if one received a cumulative rating of 140 or higher that one could begin this interaction. But, it was emphasized, the choice was *always* in the hands of the individual.

After making this choice, that individual, Bradley, went about the necessary preparations exuding excitement. He filled out the required federal and state paperwork, spilling his excited handwriting outside of the small, gray, black-bordered boxes. He requested time off from both school and work, courting his superiors with excited, good-natured pleas. He practiced with his basketball team for the last time, excitedly hugging teammates and trying to look like he was trying to look like he wasn't happy it was his last set of wind sprints.

Then, on his next birthday (as per regulations), he slowly descended into his basement bedroom. His parents, enthusiastic about Bradley seeming enthusiastic about the whole thing, had rigged up a dumbwaiter in which he could deposit the required series of items. With the press of a buzzer on the wall next to the dumbwaiter, his parents would be alerted that he had made progress and that they needed to send the next item off for rating. His mother had painted a special celebratory smiley face next to the buzzer, for encouragement. “You know you can stop whenever you want, right? Just press three times and you know we’ll know that you’ve changed your mind and you know we’ll come get you and you know we’ll still love you just as much, right? Right? Right, Bradley-boo?”

On the gray concrete wall of the basement, his father hung a life-size diagram of the human body. On the body, his father had demarcated the several different sections to be rated. He had given Bradley a special celebratory pen with which to check off each section as Bradley sent it off, and to keep track of the ratings he

received for each section. “But it really doesn’t matter what ratings you get. You know you’re all tens in our book, don’t you? Don’t you? Don’t you, Bradley?”

His friends, when he saw them for the last time before beginning, had given him a survival kit of sorts, which now lay on his desk. The kit included three issues of *Playboy*, some moisturizing lotion, a box of tissues, a copy of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, a Zippo lighter, and several pre-rolled joints wrapped in special celebratory rolling paper dotted with little balloons. “So you can celebrate a little bit after each step, y’know? Clear the body, clear the mind, that mindfulness kind of grind. Hah. Hit this shit. Hit this shit. Hit this shit, dickhead.”

He double-checked that his door was locked, let the smile fall from his face for the first time since his announcement, sighed a deep sigh originating somewhere in the physical/non-physical combinatory center of his being, and decided he should begin.

He went to the workbench they had installed for him. The tools provided were really quite impressive. He was pretty sure it wouldn’t even hurt. First was the

digestive system, so that he wouldn't have to eat for the rest of the process; the reasoning behind this never quite made sense to him, but he figured they were smarter than he was. He picked up the pre-programmed laser cutter, opened his mouth, and fed it down his throat.

Ten seconds later, he felt an extended pinch. The machine beeped, letting him know it was done. That was it, then. Just a long pinch. He pulled out the laser cutter, and along with it came his stomach, intestines, gallbladder, liver, and kidney, all shiny and moist. He held the organs in front of his face for a moment, inspecting them. A month ago, in preparation, he had stopped drinking beer and coffee and all other stomach irritants. He thought it had paid off. The entire digestive system dangling before his face practically radiated good health.

He plopped the mass of dripping, twisting, throbbing organs down on the tray of the dumb waiter. The stomach expanded, but just slightly. The intestines squirmed, but just slightly. He pressed the buzzer. Immediately, the cables tightened and the tray ascended.

As it rose, he saw his liver contract, but just slightly. His mother shouted down the shaft, “We’re so proud of you, Bradley-boo!!”

He felt a little odd, like there was an ache in some deep physical/non-physical combinatory center of his being, but he figured it was probably because he had just yanked out half of his internal organs, and so he ignored the feeling. He walked over to the diagram and checked off the area designated for the digestive system. He felt a little accomplished. It was time to celebrate, he realized, so he picked up the October *Playboy* and flipped through until he found a buxom blond that tickled his fancy. He masturbated. His orgasm felt maybe a little hollower than normal, but, again, he now lacked most of the components of his torso, so he thought nothing of it. He lit one of the joints and smoked it quickly, his hand still in his pants and the magazine still open to the same page. What bliss, he thought that he thought.

One day passed. A note descended on the dumbwaiter. It read, “You got an eight! Great job, hon! You’re so talented!” It was a fair rating, especially

because he had given himself a stomach ulcer during a stressful stretch of junior year and had once found blood in his stool. He marked an eight on the diagram.

According to regulations, his feet were next, so he took off his socks, spread his toes on the cold concrete floor, and walked to the workbench. He stood for a moment, wiggling his toes and rocking back and forth on his heels. The laser cutter lay ready. He hopped up onto the bench and wielded the tool toward his feet. Again, a pinch, this time shorter and duller than before. The feet dropped to the floor. The tool cauterized while cutting; bleeding was minimal. Bradley lowered himself gingerly onto his stumps. He bent to pick up his feet and went about clipping the toenails and sanding off the dead skin.

When the feet were clean, he picked them up and hobbled over to the dumbwaiter. He fell once on the way, tumbling over his stumps and thudding hard against the concrete floor. The feet eventually made it to the tray, and Bradley eventually made it to his bed, and Bradley's hand eventually found the zipper of his pants,

at which point he commenced his celebratory masturbatory routine. He figured it was a good way to keep his swimmers fresh and his mind relaxed for when the time came.

Soon, another note descended in the dumbwaiter. His feet had received a six. He hadn't expected much, given their lack of arches and excessive size, but the number was nonetheless a cause for stress (a stress that failed to grab hold of his missing stomach, where it normally asserted itself, and instead made its way to his spine, where its hold felt a little weaker, a little less actual). He knew the mathematics of the rating process. An average of seven per section would be deemed adequate, so every section that fell below that rating ate away at his chances. He stumped over to the chart and wrote a hateful "6," despising himself, though the despising was not sharp, but rather a dull, abstract, centerless feeling.

The process continued. His legs followed his feet onto the dumbwaiter. Then his nose. His ears. His genitalia. His abdominal muscles. His left arm. His

pectoral muscles. His rib cage. His facial muscles. Each of these dismemberments was accompanied by an act of quality maximization. He picked and blew his nose thoroughly. He gouged his ear canals with a Q-tip. He stared lustfully at Miss September to aid genital blood flow. He did crunches. He curled *Gravity's Rainbow*. He bench-pressed *Gravity's Rainbow*. He cracked and popped his vertebra into the correct alignment. He practiced the smile he had been wearing in front of his friends and family for the weeks between his decision and the beginning of the process. A point here or there might make all the difference.

Ratings descended at a constant pace. After he cut and sent his legs off, he had to yank the diagram down from the wall to be able to fill in the rest of his ratings while lying on the floor. They were respectable. He was on the edge: still in range of the threshold, but still in danger of falling below it as well.

The oddest thing throughout this entire process was the lack of sensation associated with it. At first, the pinch of the laser-cutter had been the only pain he felt.

Soon he didn't even feel that. Rather, an odd sensationless sort of state had infected his body, despite his central nervous system still being somewhat intact. Even though he lay with his innards open, nothing hurt. At first, he smoked the celebratory joints partly as a way to numb the weird physical/non-physical ache that followed each dismemberment. Now, there was nothing to numb. This lack of feeling had increased as he went about the business of removing more and more of his physical self. This business had taken more and more time, as he had fewer and fewer body parts with which to propel his body back and forth between the workbench and the dumbwaiter.

Then, after submitting his lungs, his parents passed down a mechanical arm on the dumbwaiter. The arm, a loving note explained, was programmed to assist in the final parts of the process, now that many of Bradley's propulsive mechanisms were no longer attached to his body.

The arm picked him up, swung him on to the table, and grabbed the laser-cutter.

Bradley lay on the cold, metal workbench, waiting for the cold, metal mechanical arm to commence the chopping. He saw his heart beating, throbbing against the table with no rib cage to protect it. Bradley asked himself why he was doing what he was doing. He saw his right arm hanging limp from his shoulder socket, skinless. What did he hope to gain from this project? His eyes dangled from his brain, twisting clockwise then counterclockwise on his optic nerves. Had he ever really wanted this?

And it was at this point, when Bradley saw his body further desecrated by the mechanical arm and laser-cutter, when Bradley saw his own arm severed and casually flicked into the dumbwaiter and then saw his squirming heart yanked off and shot, basketball-style, into the tray, and then felt himself lose sight in one eye and then the other (but not before seeing the first eyeball, iris a cloudy blue, plop down onto the table and roll back to rest against the gray mass of his brain, staring into his still-functional eye) and saw nothing but black, and when Bradley realized that the choice had never

been a choice at all, much less a choice that he made himself, it was at *this* point, and not when his arm and then heart and then eyes and then, finally, brain were sent off for final rating, and not when his reconstituted body, assembled by the mysterious evaluators, arrived on his front porch from the rating facility with his certificate of approval to surprise his parents, who showered him with all sorts of love and affection, unconditionally, and not when his friends came over to share a celebratory blunt with him, and not when everyone didn't realize that this was not Bradley, though they could be excused because no one--no one--had ever been themselves, no, it was at *this* point that Bradley's non-physical soul departed his physical being and floated up into the ether to join, for the first time, the souls of his family and his friends and everyone else that had "chosen" to be evaluated, and all these souls hovered together, looking down and watching their former, half-remembered physical vessels go about their mundane little lives with no idea of their absolute emptiness, and these souls were

spiritually ecstatic and perhaps only a little rueful,
because it was never really a choice, was it?