

Bile

by John

Pick that up for me, will you? That's your universe you're holding in your hand. To find something like this, here. In a Seven Eleven of all places.

Lucky you.

You take the universe, a milky bar, and hold it up for the cashier to scan. Then you notice it. The black ooze. All over the card terminal. Black fingerprints on the number pad. A streak of black bile across the NFC screen. You freeze. The beep of the scanner snaps you back. You jam the candybar down into the pockets of your red barbour jacket. Did the scanner touch it? No, you would have noticed.

"Hey, are you gonna pay for that candy, or what?" The cashier says. As you scramble around in your pockets, your bus ticket falls out. You consider a moment to pick it back up, but no. It isn't safe. Not with the ooze already here.

"I'm just, I'm gonna pay." You say, and take out a bag of surgical gloves.

"What the fuck?" The cashier stares at you. It's routine by now. First one hand, then the other.

"I just gotta be safe. Gotta be safe, you know?"

You know he doesn't, you see the ooze already on him. It's in his long scruffy hair. You can almost see the ooze seeping into his follicles. He's done for, for sure. He doesn't even know it, but he's done for. At least he didn't touch you with that scanner. That would have been it, game over.

You stare into his eyes, hidden behind his glasses. He can't see what you see. You hope he sees you're sorry for him.

You take out your debit card, hold it carefully over the NFC pad. The first two lights light up, the beeps of the card being recognized ring in your ear. You're hyper focused, time crawls to a stop. Your heart thumps once, it feels like it wants to punch its way through your ribcage. You peer at the card terminal, just in time to see the streak of black ooze across the NFC area bunch together, like tiny army ants. It wants to reach your card. It's a way in. It could get you like this. It won't reach it, you pray. Please don't reach it. The third light flicks on, and another sound rings loud in your ear.

You have to make a choice now.

Can you do it, can you sacrifice your debit card for safety? It's your only source of cash, but in another couple of milliseconds it's nothing but a worthless plastic piece of trash. You're going to have to get rid of it. Burn it. Along with the gloves.

You let it linger.

Just as the final light lights up on the terminal, and the final "Beep" drones out. Just as your sensory world reunites with real time. Just as your heart once again yearns to break free of your body, your card gets touched. It's just a tap, but it's enough. A small dot of black ooze in the very corner of the card. Shit.

You hold the card extended outwards, and run out the store.

"Hey, kid! What the... Are you okay?" The cashier, dumbfounded, stares at your back as you stumble outside.

Shit, shit, shit, shit. You've got it on your card. You dumb fuck.

You only bought a milky bar, you idiot. You're fucked. All this for a milky bar.

"But no," you think. "Not just a milky bar. The only part of existence still clean. Still pure. And I have it. I Have it in my pocket."

You look around you. The Seven Eleven you just left is remote. A long road leads in both directions. Some gas pumps, but no cars. You look at the card and panic. The ooze, it managed to reach your glove. Somewhere around here you have to make a fire. Burn the card, burn your gloves. Quickly before it spreads.

Look, around you, what do you see?

Quick! Tell me!

"I see the forest, that's all." you say to yourself. "Just trees. But that's good. The forest is calm, nice, and clean."

You move into the forest.

Idiot. What are you doing? You're contaminated, you'll just bring it with you, into the forest. You'll ruin it as you ruined your home. You got to dispose of the card and the gloves first.

Now!

You look at your hand, holding the card. A small black line slowly crawls over your thumb, reaching for your knuckles, you imagine the line burning your skin, and you feel it. A searing pain, like your thumb splitting open, dividing in two.

You scream.

Just let go of the card, just drop it here, and the gloves, and run away. Drop it here, at the edge of the forest, and run away. The opposite direction. across the road again, and into the fields beyond. It's probably safe.

"No, I can't just drop it. Who knows, if it reaches the roots then..."

You're right, what will happen if one drop of that black ooze touches the roots below you. Will it just contaminate a single tree, or are you trapped in a cage of nothing. Imagine it, eating away everything around you. Eating the trees, the brush, all of it. The very thing now eating your hand.

"But it's not." You say to yourself. "I only imagined that part. It's just on my glove, see?"

You hold up your hand grasping the card. The black bile still runs across your one time use latex glove. Runs down to a small tear between your thumb and forefinger.

Oh shit.

What have you done?

How could you not have noticed this?

How could this even be worth it? Leaving your home like this, with no plan, no future.

Nothing to return to.

It's all burned. All of it torched.

Along with Szymańska, the old polish woman on the second floor. She had a broken hip, damnit, she never got out in time. You burned her too.

But that whole building was done for. Touched by this damned ooze. She was better off dying like thi...

Shut up. You killed someone, someone who didn't deserve to die. You ended that old lady, burned her to death. You deemed your place of home unsafe and unclean and set it on fire and ran. To hell with the consequences.

You stare at your hand. You know what you must do.

You look around you, for a sharp rock, or something to tear and break your bones. There is still some lighter fluid left in your bag. If you're quick you can still just cut that dead hand off, then torch the ground where it lands and run.

With your right arm raised high above your head, you crawl along the ground, looking for something, something to chop your own hand off with.

Sweat crawls into your eyes, it stings, and as it reaches your mouth, you taste it, that salty taste of fear and panic. You must look like such a mess, crawling in this weird crablike position, with one hand held high. What a fool you are to end up like this. You could've just stayed home, just kept to yourself. Just live alone, in your apartment.

"I tried that." You think to yourself.

It only took one mistake. One failed delivery. Your package, contaminated. Who knows what or who touched it, it doesn't matter. You left it in the stairway, and ran to your apartment. You needed to clean the stairway. Fire should do the trick. You open your Kitchen closet. Three bottles of lighter fluid, saved just for this. You drench the package, the carpet. the stairs, everything. As the wooden floor burns you run. Through your apartment. Through the kitchen. Out the window. The emergency stairwell. It only took one mistake. You panicked. Burnt down an entire building. You panicked. You coward, you big, dumb coward.

Fucking coward, do something! You just lost precious seconds wandering in your own thoughts. Just fucking grab something, you idiot!

Your left hand grabs hold on a long, oval shaped granite rock.

Now do it. Chop it off!

You put your right hand down on an exposed root.

Coward, just do it! Just fucking get rid of it now, while you can still escape!

You smash down, landing a direct hit on your wrist. You feel the bones splinter inside, and a pain like a thousand needles all at once piercing your skin, spreading up your forearm. You scream again, tears well up in your eyes. You lift your hand again, and prepare to strike.

“You idiot,” you think. “What am I doing?”

“What is wrong with me?” you whimper, as tears flow freely down your chin.

Hold on. Think for once. What are you doing here? You’re cutting off your own hand here. Self amputation. Do you even know how to treat wounds this big?

“God, it has to be done though.” You say, and snifle. “Fucking Christ!”

You yell out and strike again. And again.

And again.

The root gives way, and by reflex you try to brace yourself by your weak right hand. A pain like a thousand needles tear through your forearm. You still feel it, as you lay on the ground, screaming. Through tears of pain you inspect your work. The wrist is blue and black and tender. It’s twisted and torn, and blood flows from several ruptures. The bone is fractured, and skin and tendons and muscles torn in several places. Nothing but minced meat.

Twist it off, just twist it. You can do that much at least. Twist it off right now.

You grab it with your left hand and after a quick breath, twist as hard as you can. The skin starts to tear, rending open. A fourth time you let out that familiar scream, a scream of prey. That is what you are, prey. Running from the blackness, forever just running. What did you think you could do, really? Wouldn't it be better for you too to just let it run you over, like it has everyone else. When was the last time you visited your parents? Or had friends over?

They are all gone into that vast black emptiness, touched by the ooze. Contaminated. Dead. You say that to yourself, in your head. As you tear off your hand, in anger, in pain, in desperation.

Now toss it. Toss it away.

You pull back your left hand, and prepare to toss.

Wait.

Wait!

Your eyes open wide, you have lost your debit card.

Shit, oh shit, oh shit.

Where is it? You have to find it.

Fast, quick, find it! We have to get rid of that as well, or all this has been for nothing!

Through searing pain, you turn yourself over on your side. You see it, it's laying on the ground beside you. The black ooze is there also. Your makeshift chopping block is the same, you see it now. It glistens with your blood, of course. But also with that darkness. And as you notice it. You see the trees around all become black.

You did it. You trapped yourself.

“What now?” you ask.

Now you die. You lay down your head, on the ground, and die. Just like the rest. It got you too, in the end.

Then you grab it, that universe in your pocket. A small wrapped milky bar. And as you close your eyes, you drift into it. Safe, finally, from that enveloping dark.

You stare back out with your mind's eye, to your dying body, slowly eaten alive by that black bile. You can almost feel it eating your flesh. You can almost feel the cold loneliness of this madness still. But that's someone else lying there, dead. That's not you.

You are here, wrapped up and safe. Hidden away in a red barbour jacket.