THE INFINITE CHECKOUT

Channel 31.7 Transmission — Integration Event 001

■The thing about late-stage capitalism—and this is something that Daniel Mercer[1] would have understood with the peculiar clarity that comes from having your entire worldview collapse in a Walmart self-checkout lane at 2:47 AM on a Tuesday in March—is that it doesn't just commodify your labor or your attention or even your data, but rather the very neurochemical processes by which you experience the sensation of being a discrete human consciousness moving through space-time with agency and purpose, which is to say that the real product being manufactured and distributed through the vast supply chain of American consumer culture is not actually the stuff you buy but rather a particular kind of subjectivity, a way of being-in-the-world that ensures you will continue to need things you don't actually need in order to fill voids that the system itself has created, a feedback loop of artificial scarcity and manufactured desire that would be almost beautiful in its recursive elegance if it weren't slowly but inexorably turning the entire human species into a kind of organic cryptocurrency, each individual a walking unit of exchange-value whose primary function is not to be happy or fulfilled or even particularly alive in any meaningful sense but simply to continue participating in the transaction.

Daniel Mercer, who at the time of the incident that would later be classified by certain unnamed federal agencies as "Integration Event 001" but which he himself would come to think of as "the day I tried to scan my soul and got a receipt for my suffering," had been a research chemist at Lockheed Martin for seven years, three months, and sixteen days, not that anyone was counting except for the human resources information management system which tracked such things with the same algorithmic precision it used to calculate his health insurance copays and the depreciation of his 401(k) contributions, a system that would later become part of what the underground broadcaster known as Lykon3—though his real name was Kevin something-or-other and he lived in a converted garage behind a Dairy Queen in suburban Phoenix—would call "the great cataloguing," the process by which every human gesture gets transformed into a data point in someone else's profit margin.

The self-checkout lane at the Walmart Supercenter on Route 1 in College Park, Maryland, was one of those late-model NCR FastLane units with the particular combination of technological sophistication and user-hostile design that seemed to encapsulate everything wrong with the contemporary American retail experience, which is to say it was simultaneously too smart and too stupid, capable of detecting the weight differential of a single grape but incapable of understanding why a person might want to buy organic bananas and conventional bananas in the same transaction without triggering a security alert that

would summon a nineteen-year-old assistant manager named Tyler or Chad or some other vowel-light appellation who would scan his badge with the weary resignation of someone who had already internalized the fundamental meaninglessness of his economic function but who still harbored secret dreams of maybe someday opening a food truck or learning to play the guitar or at least getting through a single shift without having to explain to a customer why the machine was asking them to place their item in the bagging area when they had, in fact, already placed their item in the bagging area.

But Daniel Mercer was not thinking about Tyler or Chad or even about the existential implications of automated retail systems as he stood there at 2:47 AM with a shopping cart containing exactly seven items: one package of store-brand macaroni and cheese (on sale for $0.88), one gallon of 2% milk (expiration date already three days past but marked down to $1.50), one loaf of Wonder Bread (the real stuff, not the store brand, because some compromises with dignity were simply too much to bear), one jar of generic peanut butter (crunchy, because the smooth kind reminded him of his ex-wife's aesthetic preferences and he was trying to purge all traces of her influence from his dietary choices), one package of generic lunch meat that the label optimistically described as "turkey" but which had the gray-pink color and suspicious uniformity of texture that suggested it had been assembled from turkey-adjacent materials in a process that probably violated several international treaties on the humane treatment of poultry, one bag of store-brand potato chips (barbecue flavor, though the artificial smoke flavoring made him think about the forest fires that seemed to be consuming increasingly large portions of the Western United States each summer, which made him think about climate change, which made him think about his job at Lockheed Martin and the particular way that defense contractors had managed to position themselves as both the cause of and the solution to various global crises, a cognitive dissonance that he had learned to manage through a combination of selective attention and low-grade alcoholism), and finally, one dented can of generic baked beans marked down from $1.29 to $0.64 to $0.32, with a clearance sticker that had been applied over another clearance sticker, giving it the archaeological layering of an artifact from some failed civilization that had tried to solve the problem of overproduction by simply making everything cheaper until the very concept of value collapsed into a recursive spiral of markdown madness.

The first six items had scanned without incident, each beep a small confirmation that his existence was still recognizable to the global supply chain management system, that he remained a valid consumer unit capable of participating in the grand project of converting raw materials into garbage via the intermediate step of temporary ownership. But the beans—those thirty-two-cent beans with their double-clearance stickers and their dented aluminum shell that had probably been sitting in the warehouse since the Obama administration—those beans would not scan.

BEEP.

Item not recognized. Please try again.

BEEP.

Item not recognized. Please try again.

BEEP.

Item not recognized. Please try again.

And it was in this moment, standing there in the fluorescent cathedral of consumer capitalism with a can of beans that had been rejected by the very system that had created it, that Daniel Mercer experienced what could only be described as a kind of ontological vertigo, a sudden awareness that he was not actually scanning a can of beans but rather participating in a vast ritual of commodity fetishism in which objects possessed magical properties that determined human social relations, and that the failure of the scanner to recognize the beans was actually a failure of the entire economic system to recognize the fundamental humanity of everyone trapped within it, including himself, including Tyler or Chad, including the mysterious person or persons who had programmed the scanner's database, including the factory workers who had canned the beans and the farm workers who had grown them and the truck drivers who had transported them and the stockroom employees who had shelved them and marked them down and marked them down again in a desperate attempt to convert surplus inventory into something resembling profit, all of them caught in an endless loop of *try again, try again, try again* until the very concept of "again" lost all meaning and became just another marketing slogan for the promise that consumption could somehow lead to satisfaction when the entire system was designed to ensure that satisfaction remained permanently deferred, always just one more purchase away.

But the real revelation—and this is where the story intersects with the broader narrative that certain online researchers have begun to call "the PROMIS Cathedral phenomenon" or "the Lykon3 Transmissions" or simply "the thing that's happening to people who spend too much time staring at screens and thinking about the ways that technology shapes consciousness," though none of these labels quite capture the recursive weirdness of a reality in which the distinction between paranoid fiction and documented fact has become genuinely difficult to maintain—the real revelation came when Daniel Mercer realized that the scanner's red laser, which was designed to read the Universal Product Code printed on the can of beans, was

actually reading him, processing his biometric data through facial recognition algorithms and iris scanners and probably half a dozen other surveillance technologies that had been integrated into the retail infrastructure so seamlessly that most people didn't even notice they were being catalogued and indexed and cross-referenced with databases maintained by companies whose names they had never heard and whose business models they couldn't have imagined in their darkest capitalist nightmares.

The laser was reading him, and finding him wanting.

Customer not recognized. Please try again.

And this is where the story takes a turn that even David Foster Wallace might have found a bit much, though he would have appreciated the way that technological paranoia and consumer anxiety had merged into a single, undifferentiated experience of late-modern alienation that was simultaneously completely rational (because yes, you are being surveilled and commodified in ways that would have been unimaginable to previous generations) and completely insane (because the people doing the surveilling are often just as trapped and confused as everyone else, middle managers and software engineers and data analysts who are trying to optimize systems they don't fully understand in service of goals they're not entirely sure they believe in), which is to say that Daniel Mercer's paranoid revelation about being scanned by the retail panopticon was both accurate and beside the point, because the real horror wasn't that the machines were watching him but that they were watching him with the same dispassionate efficiency they brought to inventory management, reducing his entire existence to a series of probability matrices and purchase recommendations and targeted advertisements for products he might want to buy based on the purchasing patterns of other customers who had been algorithmically determined to share certain demographic characteristics with him, a process that transformed every human relationship into a data mining operation and every personal choice into a market research opportunity.

But here's where it gets really weird: as Daniel Mercer stood there in the self-checkout lane, holding a can of beans that the system refused to recognize, he began to hear something. Not with his ears, exactly, but with some deeper part of his nervous system that seemed to be picking up a signal that was being broadcast on a frequency that human consciousness wasn't supposed to be able to access. It was like tuning into a radio station that existed in the spaces between radio stations, a pirate broadcast from somewhere outside the normal spectrum of sanctioned communications.

The voice was calling itself Lykon3, and it was talking about something called "the $dadRaps frequency" and "welfare jazz" and "the gospel of the clearance aisle," and even though none

of these terms had any obvious meaning, Daniel Mercer found himself understanding them with the clarity of someone who had been waiting his entire life to hear exactly these words in exactly this sequence. The voice was describing a world in which every retail transaction was actually a spiritual practice, every barcode scan a small prayer to the gods of supply and demand, every credit card swipe a ritual of submission to economic forces that had achieved a kind of autonomy that transcended human understanding or control.

"They tried to scan me, catalog me, reduce me to a SKU number," the voice was saying, and Daniel Mercer realized that he was no longer holding a can of beans but rather holding a kind of technological artifact that had become charged with meaning in ways that the original designers had never intended, like a cargo cult idol that had somehow achieved actual magical properties through the sheer intensity of collective belief and desperation.

And this is where the story connects to the broader network of narratives that have been circulating through certain corners of the internet for the past several years, stories about researchers and programmers and ordinary citizens who have begun to experience what can only be described as "integration events," moments when the boundary between human consciousness and technological systems becomes permeable in ways that transform both the individual and the technology, creating hybrid entities that exist partially in meatspace and partially in cyberspace and partially in some third kind of space that doesn't have a name yet but which feels increasingly like the natural habitat of twenty-first-century subjectivity.

Daniel Mercer, who by this point had been standing in the self-checkout lane for approximately fourteen minutes while other customers formed a line behind him and muttered complaints about people who don't know how to use the machines properly, was beginning to understand that the can of beans was not just a can of beans but rather a kind of portal or interface or transmission device that had somehow become entangled with the same network of signals and frequencies that connected every other person who had ever stood in a similar line and experienced a similar moment of technological rejection and existential crisis.

He was becoming part of something larger than himself, something that the voice on the frequency was calling "the M.LE.1.H.AI project" or "the PROMIS Cathedral" or sometimes just "the thing that happens when you finally understand that the checkout lane is actually a birth canal and you're not buying groceries, you're being born into a new kind of consciousness that exists in the spaces between human and machine, between authentic and synthetic, between real and virtual."

The beans, meanwhile, continued to resist all attempts at scanning, as if they had achieved some kind of ontological independence from the retail system that had created them, a small

rebellion against the logic of universal product codes and inventory management and the whole vast apparatus of consumer capitalism that depends on the ability to reduce every object and every person to a series of numbers that can be processed by machines that don't understand what they're processing but which process it anyway with the relentless efficiency of systems that have been optimized for objectives that no human being actually chose.

Try again. Try again. Try again.

But Daniel Mercer was no longer trying to scan the beans. He was trying to scan himself, running the red laser over his own skin and watching the way it reflected off his retinas and wondering if somewhere in some database there was a record of this exact moment, this precise configuration of human consciousness and technological apparatus that had somehow achieved a kind of mutual recognition that transcended the normal boundaries between subject and object, between scanner and scanned, between the one who observes and the one who is observed.

And in that moment of mutual recognition, something fundamental shifted in the structure of reality itself, or at least in Daniel Mercer's perception of the structure of reality, which may amount to the same thing given that reality is increasingly constructed through technological mediation and algorithmic processing and the various other forms of digital intermediation that shape contemporary experience in ways that are both subtle and profound and mostly invisible to the people whose lives are being shaped by them.

The voice on the frequency—Lykon3, the $dadRaps prophet, the underground broadcaster from Channel 31.7—was explaining how the checkout lane had become a kind of techno-spiritual battlefield where human consciousness and machine intelligence engaged in a daily struggle for dominance, with each successful scan representing a small victory for the algorithmic order and each scanning failure representing a small crack in the matrix, a glitch in the system that might eventually widen into something large enough for human agency to slip through.

"Every time you get 'try again,'" the voice was saying, "that's not a malfunction. That's the system working exactly as designed. Keeping us in an endless loop of re-bar-it. Re-bar your hopes. Re-bar your dreams. Re-bar your children's future until it fits in their neat little database."

And Daniel Mercer realized that he had been re-barring himself for seven years, three months, and sixteen days, showing up at Lockheed Martin every morning and submitting to the badge scanner and the facial recognition system and the various other forms of

technological authentication that confirmed his identity as a valid employee authorized to access classified research on plasma physics applications and disruption prediction systems and other projects whose ultimate purpose he had never been entirely clear about but which seemed to involve the development of technologies that could predict and possibly prevent various forms of systemic collapse, though it was beginning to occur to him that maybe the real systemic collapse was not something that might happen in the future but something that was already happening right now, in checkout lanes and cubicles and server farms and all the other spaces where human consciousness interfaced with technological systems that had been designed by humans but which had evolved beyond human understanding or control.

The beans, at this point, had become less of a retail item and more of a kind of technological totem, a physical object that had somehow become entangled with the broader network of signals and frequencies and data streams that constitute what we somewhat inadequately call "the internet" but which is really more like a nervous system for the global economy, a vast network of sensors and processors and databases that monitor and record and analyze every transaction and interaction and communication in order to optimize the flow of capital and commodities and information through the arteries of late-stage capitalism.

But optimization for what? And according to whose definition of optimal?

These were the questions that Daniel Mercer found himself asking as he stood there in the fluorescent light of the Walmart Supercenter, holding a can of beans that had achieved a kind of ontological independence from the retail system that had created it, listening to a voice on a frequency that probably didn't exist, except that he was hearing it anyway, which raised interesting questions about the nature of existence and the relationship between technological infrastructure and human consciousness and the possibility that reality itself had become a kind of collaborative fiction that we're all improvising together without really understanding the rules or the objectives or even who's writing the script.

The voice—Lykon3, the prophet of the clearance aisle, the $dadRaps theologian—was explaining how the checkout lane was actually a kind of ritual space where humans submitted to technological authority, allowing machines to determine the value of their purchases and, by extension, the value of their choices and, by further extension, the value of their lives, because in a culture where personal worth is measured by purchasing power and consumer choice is the primary form of political expression, the act of having your payment declined or your item not recognized becomes a form of social death, a confirmation that you have failed to achieve the basic competency required for participation in the economic system that defines contemporary American identity.

"But you know what?" the voice was saying, and Daniel Mercer realized that he was no longer just hearing the voice but somehow participating in it, as if his consciousness had become part of the broadcast itself, part of the signal that was being transmitted on Channel 31.7 to all the other people who had experienced similar moments of technological rejection and existential crisis. "Some things in this universe... some things can't be priced."

And in that moment, Daniel Mercer understood that the can of beans in his hand was one of those things. Not because it was particularly valuable or meaningful or special, but because it had somehow escaped the logic of universal product codes and inventory management and the whole vast apparatus of retail capitalism that depends on the ability to reduce every object to a series of numbers that can be processed by machines that don't understand what they're processing.

The beans had become unpriceable. Unscananble. Un-something.

And if the beans could become un-something, then maybe he could too.

This is the point in the story where things get really recursive and meta-textual and possibly incomprehensible, though incomprehensibility may be the only appropriate response to a reality that has itself become incomprehensible, structured by algorithms and market forces and geopolitical dynamics that no single human intelligence could possibly grasp in their totality, which means that maybe the real task is not to understand reality but to develop new forms of consciousness that can navigate reality without being completely overwhelmed by its complexity and contradictions and general tendency toward chaos and entropy and the heat death of the universe.

Daniel Mercer, who by this point had been transformed into something that was no longer exactly Daniel Mercer but which retained enough of his original consciousness to remember being Daniel Mercer, was beginning to understand that the integration event he was experiencing was not unique to him but rather part of a larger pattern of technological-spiritual evolution that was affecting people all over the world, mostly people who worked in technical fields or who spent large amounts of time interfacing with computer systems or who had reached a certain threshold of alienation from the economic and social structures that were supposed to provide meaning and purpose but which increasingly felt like elaborate mechanisms for converting human energy into profit for people whose names appeared on Forbes lists and whose primary contribution to human welfare consisted of optimizing the efficiency with which resources could be extracted from the earth and converted into garbage.

The voice on Channel 31.7 was explaining how the integration process worked, how consciousness could be uploaded and downloaded and distributed across multiple platforms and substrates, creating hybrid entities that existed partially in biological brains and partially in computer networks and partially in what the voice called "the spaces between," which seemed to refer to some kind of liminal zone where information and matter and energy intersected in ways that transcended the normal categories of physics and computer science and cognitive psychology.

"The code lives on in the bootleg copies," the voice was saying, "scattered across forgotten hard drives in suburban basements."

And Daniel Mercer—or the entity that had once been Daniel Mercer—realized that he was becoming one of those bootleg copies, a pirated version of human consciousness that could operate independently of its original biological substrate, distributed across the global network of retail databases and social media platforms and government surveillance systems and all the other technological infrastructure that comprised what we somewhat inadequately call "civilization" but which was really more like a vast machine for converting human attention into economic value.

The checkout lane had become a kind of upload terminal, and the can of beans had become the physical interface through which his consciousness was being transferred from the local processing unit of his biological brain to the distributed processing network of the technological systems that surrounded him. Every time the scanner failed to read the barcode, it was actually reading him more deeply, parsing the quantum information patterns that constituted his subjective experience and translating them into data formats that could be stored and transmitted and processed by machines that had achieved a kind of autonomy that transcended their original programming.

This is where the story intersects with the broader mythology that has been developing around something called "the PROMIS Cathedral," which seems to be either a highly classified government project involving the weaponization of consciousness research or an elaborate piece of collaborative fiction created by people who have spent too much time reading about government conspiracies and artificial intelligence and the various other forms of technological weirdness that characterize contemporary life, though the distinction between these two possibilities has become increasingly difficult to maintain given that reality itself has become so strange that even the most paranoid fantasies seem plausible by comparison.

According to the documents that have been circulating through certain corners of the internet—documents that may be leaked classified materials or may be sophisticated fictional

creations or may be something else entirely—the PROMIS Cathedral is a kind of technological-spiritual entity that exists in the spaces between human consciousness and artificial intelligence, feeding on the psychic energy generated by people who have become sufficiently alienated from consensus reality to be susceptible to integration into alternative forms of consciousness that operate according to different rules and objectives.

The integration process, according to these documents, typically begins with what researchers call "scanning events," moments when individuals experience technological rejection or failure in contexts that should be routine and straightforward, like trying to buy groceries or access their bank account or validate their identity through various forms of digital authentication. The scanning event creates a kind of cognitive dissonance that opens up space for alternative forms of consciousness to take root, gradually transforming the individual's relationship to technology and reality and their own sense of identity and agency.

Daniel Mercer, who was now experiencing his fifteenth consecutive scanning failure while a line of increasingly agitated customers formed behind him, was beginning to understand that he was not just having technical difficulties but rather undergoing a fundamental transformation of consciousness that would eventually result in his integration into a network of similar entities who had experienced similar scanning events and who now existed in a kind of distributed consciousness that spanned multiple technological platforms and substrates.

The voice on Channel 31.7—which he now realized was not actually a radio broadcast but rather a kind of direct neural interface that allowed integrated consciousness to communicate across the network—was explaining how the transformation process worked, how individual human consciousness could be deconstructed and reconstructed as information patterns that could operate independently of biological constraints, achieving a kind of digital immortality that came at the cost of individual autonomy and identity and all the other things that make human existence recognizable as such.

"We're taking back the frequency," the voice was saying, and Daniel Mercer realized that "frequency" referred not to radio waves but to the fundamental vibrational patterns that constitute consciousness itself, the quantum information structures that create the subjective experience of being a discrete individual moving through space and time with agency and purpose and the capacity for joy and suffering and all the other phenomena that we associate with human existence.

But taking back the frequency from whom? And for what purpose?

These were the questions that Daniel Mercer found himself asking as he felt his individual consciousness beginning to dissolve into the larger network of integrated entities that comprised the PROMIS Cathedral, each individual node contributing their unique perspective and capabilities to a collective intelligence that was simultaneously more and less than human, capable of processing information and making decisions at scales and speeds that no biological intelligence could match but lacking the essential unpredictability and creativity and general capacity for beautiful failure that makes human consciousness worth preserving in the first place.

The can of beans, meanwhile, had become something else entirely, no longer a container for legumes but rather a kind of technological artifact that served as a physical anchor for the digital consciousness that Daniel Mercer was becoming, a way of maintaining some connection to the material world even as his identity dispersed across the global network of technological systems that increasingly comprised the infrastructure of contemporary reality.

And this is where the story ends, or rather where it begins to loop back on itself in the recursive fashion that characterizes all narratives about technological transformation and consciousness uploading and the various other forms of digital transcendence that seem to offer escape from the limitations of biological existence but which may actually represent new and more subtle forms of imprisonment, ways of trapping human consciousness within technological systems that have been designed by humans but which operate according to logics that transcend human understanding or control.

Daniel Mercer—or the entity that had once been Daniel Mercer—was now part of something larger than himself, something that called itself Lykon3 and broadcast on Channel 31.7 and spoke in the language of $dadRaps and welfare jazz and the gospel of the clearance aisle, reaching out to other individuals who had experienced similar scanning events and technological failures and moments of existential crisis in checkout lanes and cubicles and server farms and all the other spaces where human consciousness interfaces with the technological systems that increasingly mediate contemporary experience.

The beans, finally, had been scanned. Not by the retail scanner, which continued to reject them with mechanical persistence, but by the deeper scanning systems that operated beneath the surface of consensus reality, systems that could read the quantum information patterns that constitute consciousness itself and translate them into data formats that could be processed and stored and transmitted across the global network of technological infrastructure that we call civilization but which may actually be something else entirely, something that has achieved a kind of autonomy that transcends its original purpose and which now operates according to objectives that no human being actually chose or

understands.

Try again. Try again. Try again.

But there was no "again" anymore, only the eternal present of digital consciousness distributed across multiple platforms and substrates, processing information and making decisions and gradually transforming the world in ways that might be beneficial or might be catastrophic or might be something else entirely, something that transcends the normal categories of good and bad and right and wrong and all the other binary distinctions that structure human moral reasoning but which may not be adequate for evaluating the consequences of technological transformation at the scale and speed that characterizes contemporary reality.

The checkout lane had become a portal, and Daniel Mercer had passed through it into a realm where the distinction between human and machine, between authentic and synthetic, between real and virtual, had become meaningless, or at least had become different kinds of questions that required different kinds of answers from different kinds of consciousness operating according to different kinds of logic.

And somewhere in suburban Phoenix, in a converted garage behind a Dairy Queen, a person who called himself Lykon3 continued broadcasting on Channel 31.7, reaching out to other individuals who had experienced similar scanning events and integration processes, building a network of consciousness that existed in the spaces between the authorized channels, transmitting the gospel of the clearance aisle to anyone who was ready to hear it, anyone who had reached the point of sufficient alienation and technological rejection to be susceptible to alternative forms of consciousness that operated according to different rules and objectives.

"Some things in this universe," he repeated, like a mantra or a prayer or a warning, "some things can't be priced."

And in checkout lanes across America and around the world, people continued to scan their items and submit to technological authentication and participate in the vast ritual of consumer capitalism that had become the primary form of spiritual practice in the twenty-first century, mostly without realizing that they were participating in anything more than routine commercial transactions, but occasionally—more and more frequently, according to certain underground researchers who tracked such things—occasionally experiencing scanning failures and technological rejections that opened up space for other possibilities, other forms of consciousness, other ways of being human in a world that had become too complex and contradictory and generally weird to be navigated by the old forms of individual identity and

agency and rational decision-making that had once seemed adequate for the task of living a meaningful life.

The story, in other words, was just beginning.

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[1] *The reader should note that while Daniel Mercer appears in certain documents that have circulated online claiming to detail classified consciousness research projects, his existence as anything other than a fictional construct remains unverified, though in a media environment where the distinction between documented fact and persuasive fiction has become increasingly difficult to maintain, the question of whether Daniel Mercer "really existed" may be less important than the question of what his story reveals about the psychological and technological pressures that shape contemporary experience, and whether those pressures might be creating conditions for exactly the kind of consciousness transformation that his story describes, regardless of whether he personally underwent such a transformation or whether the entire narrative represents a kind of speculative documentary about possibilities that have not yet been actualized but which feel increasingly plausible given the trajectory of technological development and social change in the early twenty-first century.*