

THE BLACKOUT

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I

The mistakes didn't show up right away. Their endemic nature only became apparent when it was far too late. That's the thing isn't it, about mistakes: they're always presumed to be incidents. When they're not – then what? A mis-take: implies recovery implies that one can try again. That it can be fixed, the mis-take. How untrue that assumption proved to be, in 2026 A.D.

Before we divulge more salient facts and gory details of the enfolding cataclysm, consider the exponential – or logarithmic, I'm a writer, not a mathematician – effects when mistakes start interacting. Clusterfuck does not begin to describe it.

A clusterfuck is a misconception. It's a military term, and they're used to mopping things up. This implies that the mopping up is of something apparent; in your face, or under your boot so to speak.

This clusterfuck was of the sneaky kind. It crept up on you with a long incubation time, like that of a virus. Very unfair! – as if viruses have any morality. Alright, so what about the clusterfuck, you ask? It was the machines.
The machines.
The machines.

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Dora took the train that fatal, cataclysmic, cold winter morning because she had the most prosaic hangover. Her breakfast consisted of two paracetamol tablets and a glugged-down quarter-litre of milk that was more or less off, depending on how much notice you'd take of the clamouring of your tastebuds.

Why milk, you ask? Well, she was Dutch, and it was her patriotic duty to save the world from the "milk lake" that would inundate the world, and destroy the economy, or whatever, at least, that was the drill in the eighties. She also just liked the taste. And she placebo'ed her stomach into thinking that the clockwise oscillations of the stuff that came out of a semi-tortured or at the least, gaslighted cow, would counteract the high-strung counterclockwise machinations of her upset gastric system.

Normally she would have taken a ride with her colleague Erwin, who had a Burmese EV that was actually charged every morning. She couldn't remember to charge her toothbrush; and more often than not, her fridge was out of juice too. Hence the penchant for items that were on the winding road to fermentation – that, or starvation. Well, let's not exaggerate, malnutrition at worst.

"Thank God for PCM," she thought shivering on platform 3, which could more aptly have been named "Blasted Windtunnel" with the icy easterly Siberian wind frosting her eyebrows. Huddling like Emperor penguins, she tried aligning to the placement of the 2nd class carriage, aiming to scoot in and leg it through to the 3rd class compartment ahead of the other penguins, the lemmings.

Scuttling more like the roach from Kafka than a noble denizen of the Antarctic, she elbowed her not so ladylike way into the musty and dimly lit

corridor: delving right down into its stuffy maw. The puddles on the tired lino in the hallway of the SubT carried the oily reflections of the sallow faces of the commuters; none of whom had important or mysterious work to look forward to. A slog, something to avoid getting a Neg Point for, some warm gruel for midday, grog with it if you were in the higher echelons or someone's relative, or in their Fief, but that was about the max of it.

Dora clenched her visapass in her pocket, picking at the fraying edges. It just had to last until X-Day, it just had to. To replace it before its expiry date would cost her 49 neuro at least: a week's wages. She was already paying her debt of rent with the loan from Erwin, and the windfall from the sale of her aunts illegal books on 20th century German Art and Aegyptian archeology had gone to pay the interest on her outstanding juice bill. Lucky her aunt Elsie had a little cornucopia of PCM, diclophenac and some crumbling benzos in her inheritance, bless her good old hoarder soul. So those greased the palms of Philip, her odious roster-chef, towards pipping up the list for extra shifts in her lauded workplace, the dept. of Audits, Double and Crosschecks & Files in the Ministry of Taxes & Records.

The subT slowed as it clawed its way out of the tunnel under the canal, the aging wiring causing the lighting to flicker. Dora sighed, stuffed her hands deeper into the pockets of her tired grey parka, pushed back into her seat, and muttered, "Geez, put an end to it all, would ya?"

Just as the pallid daylight feebly fingered the grimy safety glass, the decades of cumulative machinery mis-takes, the centennial clusterfuck, culminated into a colossal implosion somewhere unseen in the industrial sector of the Westelijk Havengebied. The lights flared then collapsed, the train shot forward in a final paroxysm, then flew off its rusty undercarriage and plunged off the embankment into the watery ditch just after the Vinkebrug in the no-mans land of the Houtrakkerweg.

When she came to, it was to screaming agony in her head, blurred vision and a 100 dB high-pitched whine in her ears. Her limbs were tangled in those of other passengers. she could hear moaning, far away, some cries, as if she was in a fishbowl. She knew then she had to get out, get out, get the heck out of that cadaver of a train. Pulling herself up out of the soft and warm bodies, covered in a shimmering lake of shards of glass, the leaking battery fuel dripping down wildly, and fizzling wiring dangling dangerously, she pushed into someone's sickly soft stomach, who groaned and then nothing. Extricating her legs, sore and scraped and her canvas pants torn, but her boots thankfully both still on, though covered in red grimy entrails, she retched but clawed her way upwards to the rent in the chassis, to the ashen wintry light.

II

The air outside was cold and remarkably still – if you'd ignore the mediaeval loss of life in the crumpled remains of the train mangled like an accordion on the rutted embankment.

Dora stood bent over, clasping her knees and gasping rasping breaths that burned her lungs with the cold. The wretchedness of the accident and the warm blood on her boots overturned the contents of her already stressed stomach, and a small puddle of yellowish bile lay steaming in the grass. "Yellow, 'cause of the PCM," she thought uselessly.

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The Anthropocene dept. Of the Ministry of Cultural & Natural Affairs had not skimmed in it's self-congratulation on the effectivity of the Cooling Programme: thusly formed in order to counteract the more negative aspects of the Anthropocene age such as wild-fires on the western Seaboard, mass extinctions in Southern Aztecia and the cataclysmic flooding of most of the coastal zones of Eurasia wiping out several million Bengali, Myanmar, Thai, Hindi and Tamil. However in all their patting of backs, the dept. Had quite forgotten that the populations of Canadian geese had long been decimated by said blistering wildfires, so no down-insulated parkas for Dora or other shivery Europeans.

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So that's why she was so darn cold, though it served to calm her neurotic heart beating a fool rhythm in her throat. She looked around expectantly – no, more than expectantly; like the certainty of a extra credits for Xmas or roses blooming digitally; looking or listening for a sign of life; of a fellow commuter; a co-worker; a human noise; a "hello". Or a simple cry for help. But no, just a tjiftjaf bleating in a copse on the other side of the neon green weiland.

The lead-coloured clouds were perched low like dark predators and met the fog rising from the peat. Dora knew it wasn't peat, just sludgy clay, but it was an age-old saying and being traditionalist, that alone gave her comfort.

Nary a human sound was to be heard. Although now a slight hissing growing in amplitude, emanated from the crumpled remains of the subT. Also steam. Steam that quickly blackened into oily smoke, which burst into flames in a space of thirty seconds. "Like the quiz game," she thought irrelevantly.

From the recesses of her mind, original, human, unpredictable, fragile, weak and emotionally unstable she fumbled for the visapass in her parka pocket and flung the battered emblem of servitude into the gaping maw; now belching happy flames about shoulder-height quite unabashedly.

She would always say that that moment was not a moment of temporary insanity, quite the opposite: a coming to.

III

Dora turned from the accordianated crematory and ran towards the copse about a hundred metres on the northern side of the weiland. "Why a tjiftjaf, they've such a dumb-ass call," she thought, although she for once didn't admonish herself, but felt gleefully disobedient, slogging through the half-frozen nitrogenous grassy bog, icy water seeping through her boots, clearing her head from the aches. "The copse should be on higher ground, and drier," she wheezed. What was she thinking?

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The machines.

She'd never been a Luddite; quite the contrary. She embraced AI, vlogging 10-20 hours a week the second it became free of charge (never mind the incessant product placement) but something was off. Round about 2026, the happy chappy chirpiness exuded by all those who contacted it, whether their bank accounts were glutted with too many zeroes or just poor punters, the witless adoption bothered her like an itchy rash.

Sure it was mind-bogglingly fast, sure it was convenient, of course the wife bots were a hit with the incels and good riddance to them all, sure it cut through the bloated vapidty the internet had become. Yet...

The hallucinations were real (pun intended), largely due to the fact that the robots had no inkling, no vestige of reality, no proprioception, no feedback loop into reality. For example, a human could think it could handle a hot pan, yet the pain felt would indicate that he was wrong and had to adjust its assumptions. The automaton would have to glean that feedback from wallows of junk on the internet; fact indistinguishable from myth or Marvel.

Of course, the AI-missionaries would account for every vagary or glitch with an addition to the convoluted rule books and principles to govern the automatons. After seventy-odd years these were entirely indistinguishable from the nimble three rules of Asimov.

Fresh out of her literature M.A. she was assigned a semi-permanent work order in the dept. Of A, D, C & F for her (feigned) assiduousness, where the irony of the kinship the bulking AI rule-books had with the Byzantine law and bylaw-books of the dept: inscrutable and obfuscating.

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The copse was slightly elevated due to its whilom purpose as an iron-age fortification. Built on the upturned hulls of expended riverine craft, flotsam and jetsam, animal bones and discarded shards of pottery, it was essentially a raft, or, for the optimistic, a house on poles. Yet sheltering an information-age trove.

When Dora was about done in with plodding through the sludge she stubbed her toe on one of these bones – and set off the silent alarm. The copse was overgrown with brambles, hazelnut shrubs, and stunted willows. A small opening looked like a path to something dry to her, and she crouched down and crawled in. Then strong hard hands pulled her down, and she tumbled down slippery plastic into a dimly lit cove. Of sorts.

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"Who the hell are you and how did you survive THAT," barked a gruff but young voice attached to a skinny young man with a scraggy beard and blonde wispy hair covering what looked like bright blue eyes. On saying "that," he waved his gangly arm in a broad arc like a crooked windmill. After sliding down, Dora was sat on her butt in a plastic dome that was rather a nasty, dirty, wet hole, filled with the ends of worms and an oozy smell. "Look dude, I just got here, and got lucky, so give me a break!" She snapped, "and for that matter, what the heck are YOU doing here?!"

Only then she noticed the trio of people crouching a few meters back in the gloom of what looked like a corridor. Scared these might be partisaners or rebels or incels, or the unvaccinated, the unpassed, and most likely hungry and violent, she made an appeasing gesture with her hands. "Look, it was a mess, I don't know what happened. But the lights went wild in the SubT and then we got like a power surge and then the whole thing shot out of the Halfwegtunnel and derailed and everyone was dead or dying except me," she said, "So I know as much as you do, okay. Oh yeah, my visapass I tossed into the fire, so I'm nobody now. By the way, my name's Dora, and you...?" she extended her right hand. The dude looked relieved, smiled a skewed smile and extended his right hand and said, "My name is Tako, welcome to the Houtrakkers, this partisaner Halfweg Hole, Dora."

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IV

- how did they know about the crash - did they exacerbate it
- How hurt is she
- Why did the 112 not come to the scene
- Are the lights still out everywhere or are they back on and are they pretending nothing went wrong\

Another mis-take is the Heathrow/Ba ticketing error

So is brexit

So is the invention of?? Flippos? Pokémon

The invention of Dubai chocolate

How does having a phone work (EarPods)

Who are these people and how did they get there and why are they welcoming to her