

Easy

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"You are Mr. Markson? Ah, yes your payment is in order. We understand you come for a LEMP." In his thick Russian accent, it sounded like he said *leemp*. That would be a weird thing to come to an abandoned warehouse to discuss with a Russian gangster, but maybe not the weirdest.

"Yes."

"You understand what that means?"

"Scientifically speaking, I know what a LEMP is lets just put it that way."

"You are aware, then, that you wont be able to fully participate in soc-"

"Aware of it, yes." *Understand it? Ill let you know when I get out West.* Aidan had handed over his phone at the desk so it wouldnt get fried, but then frying it would probably be the best outcome, since the SIM-3 card would give his location away.

We all begin the same way blind, screaming, and coated in goop. Aiden Daniel Markson began the traditional way on the morning of March 23, 2032. Aiden's first experience of the world he had entered against his will was a chilly draft, followed by random shouting, a chuckle here and there, some sobbing. A decent enough chap came along to wash the goop off, and then he felt himself floating into the comforting arms (or something or other) of some other thing with a soft voice and a nice smell to it; in fact, it smelled something like the warm viscera he was only moments earlier surrounded by. Aiden started to drift off to sleep after this welcome development, but his reverie was interrupted by a sharp pinprick.

Twenty-eight years later, a much larger and goop-free Aiden Daniel Markson plopped down into a dingy hard plastic booth in a downtown Vietnamese noodle shop. He glanced at the menu, and then stared vacantly past the backwards "B" in the window (the grade from the city health department HIGH SODIUM CONTENT SHARED RESPONSIBILITY PAYMENTS POSSIBLE and ETHNIC/CULTURAL EXEMPTION being the apparent reasons) at the condensation on the window and the lights of the endless city beyond. The shuffling of feet behind him jerked him back into reality.

"You ready to order?" The waitress managed to combine the alertness of a pen poised over a pad and the worldly disinterest of a Finnish graduate student in architecture into a single set of body language without any effort.

"Oh. Yeah. Pho veggie spicy. Water to drink. Thanks."

The order was dutifully recorded and remanded to the kitchen without further comment. Minutes later, a steaming bowl arrived along with a glass of iced water. Aidan took a spoonful from the bowl. The warmth of the

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0001 HIXBOT ADP8144139812-000007C0
SEARCHING FOR CMS PATIENT CLOUD...  DONE
...
0007 PROTOCOL INITIATED
0008 CHECKING SHIBBOLETH ...  DONE
0009 PATIENT: MARKSON, AIDEN DANIEL
0010 DOB: 48296.6509606481
0011 STATUS UPDATE ID=0085746212857132
STATUS UPDATE 0085746212857132 IN PROGRESS ...
0012 INTAKE: KCAL=400, NA=1.31
...
0172 na_accum = na_accum + this.na
0173 msg -> "WARNING SODIUM INTAKE EXCEEDS THRESHOLD (days=91)"
0174 this.Patient.BP = reportBF(BP); echo "BP 131/85"
...
1378 switch {
1379 case ((sys > 120) && (diast > 80) && (na_accum > 2.91))
1380 this.Patient.prem = this.Patient.prem +
surchargeSched.diagCode("I10")
... 1381 }
1382 msg -> "STG1 HYPERTENSION NOT MANAGED...
SHARED RESPONSIBILITY PAYMENT APPLIED"
CHECKING EMPLOYMENT RECORDS...
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spicy broth radiated inward, along with no small measure of disappointment. What he really wanted was the beef. He knew, though, that salty beef would totally jack with his biometrics, and he couldn't afford the surcharges for the fat and cholesterol on top of all the sodium. Also, beef - when you could find it - was terribly expensive. The fresh vegetables were an extravagance enough in the city, where there was barely any (non-GMO) green to begin with and the sun didn't shine down here anyhow.

The best way to eat pho is as follows: just as you're about to cram a chopstick-load of noodles or vegetable matter or whatever into your face, form a sort of channel with your tongue that you prefill with spit as a protective film against the scalding-hot water, which only compounds with the spicy burn. This Aiden did, sending another comforting wave of warmth through his body. Aiden guessed that it wouldn't feel so good when the Medicare nanobots in his blood stream had their say at the first of the month, but this was a comfort food kind of a night. No textured-soy-protein and tunnel-mushroom medley was going to cut it.

The heat having faded from the bowl, Aiden slurped down the rest of the delicious broth, put the bill of \$51.78 on his card, and hit the streets. An extravagance indeed, but being one of Uncle Sams spreadsheet jockeys had its perks. Discounts on the train, a One in a newer housing block that he only had to share with one person (a frequently-stoned freelance writer/Uber driver/data scientist contractor named Chandler), an hour-an-a-half train ride from the office.

Aidan put in his earbuds and waded out into the city's mass of humanity. Everybody either was coming home or going to their second (or third) gig. Aiden worked for the good old U. S. of A. and thus was really lucky. At least that's what he told himself - one of Uncle Sams many complex and sometimes contradictory rules, for regulars like Aiden and sometimes even for the contractors, was that thou shalt have no other employer before him. Loyalty to the cause was big with Uncle Sam. That really sucked - some contract gigs might help pay down that massive student debt sometime before he died; it might also get him out of the apartment and in with a new crowd. He was sick to death of hearing Chandler "ideate" out loud through another gadget review. On the other hand, this job paid for more room in this city than most people knew and an occasional shot of moderately fresh vegetables that were grown in actual, relatively unpolluted dirt. It also paid a healthy share of the Medicare premium; still not an easy feat, but others had it worse. There was a family of seven holed up in a Two on his wing because Mom had type II diabetes.

Aiden soothed this bitterness by thumbing up a selection of music on his phone. He tapped the line called "CHILL" in the music app and streaming into his earbuds was a selection of ambient, arrhythmic music that kind of went with the city around him, all over the place with no discernible beat whatsoever, but with a cool counterpoint to the chaos surrounding him. Brightly-lit ads everywhere; all the major corporations covered. People stomping off to work, hawkers selling things from small electronics to drugs to street food made from God knows what, a few sorry-looking souls standing around a trashcan fire; occasionally, a Government poster ad showing people of multiple ethnicities exercising together, and saying I WANT YOU TO SHARE THE RESPONSIBILITY - PUBLIC HEALTH MATTERS!

The music's only-partially soothing influence was promptly interrupted by two sharp dings, a couple of seconds apart. Text messages. *Crap.*

Chandler: dude wndrng if youd read pc about samsung quasar iv
b4 submit, dat thangs DANK

Brannen Tragen: I need you to come back to the office ASAP.

Aiden stopped and out fell a heavy sigh. He looked up toward the dark, overcast sky (not that a person could tell day or night from street level, but it was also raining). He was about 30 yards from the train station that would have conveyed him back to his moderately lumpy bed and the loving embrace of Chandler and his editors. He would instead use that train station to schlepp back to the office for what could not possibly be anything good.

Out West. Aiden's last two words to the Russian sparked a memory from college, specifically from one of the humanities courses he had been mandated to take – Early Film History. He thought he remembered the TA saying that there was some kind of romanticism embedded in this phrase, some sense of adventure combined with the thrill of anticipation. That was a hundred and fifty freaking years ago. All Aiden could feel staring back at the copper coils was a sense of creeping dread.

Four hundred fifty million people in the United States – ten billion people worldwide – have to eat. They each also have to occupy a certain volume of the three physical dimensions of space, of which Planet Earth has only a finite livable supply. Balancing these competing goals, it turned out, required optimizing these two quantities.

And optimizing these two quantities, it turned out, required that national governments make people live tightly-packed in cities and cordoning

off entire swaths of large interior provinces (the arable ones, anyway) to use as farmland. Government departments or large corporate contractors manage it, and – /textitvoila! – staple crops for everybody. Well, not exactly everybody. But most people. Most people who can work, anyway.

Somebody has to work for these entities. Fewer people /textitwant to work for them than *have* to work for them. The thirteen million people in the prison populations – the less violent ones, at least – provide a source for workers. Immigration – both legal and illegal – provide another source. Ten billion people can eat a hell of a lot of food, though, and so more farm workers are needed from somewhere. These are made up of refugees from the contract economy, those who won't – or can't – support themselves or their families in the cities. Life is hard for these people, working 12-hour shifts to meet production and shipping targets in support of international treaties on food distribution. The Philippines didn't meet its targets in 2051, but did meet them in 2052, when three Chinese aircraft carriers showed up on Filipino patrol scans approaching Manila Bay.