

beat the geeks
by
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Carl notices the rash during an episode of *Beat the Geeks*. This is the season of the reality science genre. Actors infiltrate science classrooms and seduce the profs with articles secretly written by their rivals and teams of relationship therapists. The actors break up with the profs in their classes by reading their e-mails aloud, until the profs throw their laser pointers at them or run from the room. Other actors pretend to be grant administrators. They drop by labs to tell researchers they've won millions in funding. They say with a straight face nothing is more important than the researchers finding out whether fruit flies can conceive of an afterlife. Hidden cameras record everything. Viewers vote on which actors did the best job. The winners get spots in real movies. Websites keep track of scientist suicides.

Carl watches an astrophysicist hold the hand of a woman in a black dress as they sit on a bench by the ocean. The astrophysicist tells her the latest theory about the universe, that it's infinite. He says this means that anything imaginable — and lots of things that aren't — is out there somewhere. He looks up at the sky and says somewhere the two of them are sitting on this same beach on another earth, having this same conversation. The woman is actually a transsexual, but the scientist doesn't know that. She looks over her shoulder, into the hidden camera mounted in the collar of a black Lab eating a dead seagull, and smiles. The astrophysicist keeps staring at the sky. He says there are an infinite number of them playing out this very scene throughout the universe right now.

By the next morning, the rash has spread across Carl's body. He scratches at it on the way to the shower, tearing off flakes of skin that drift to the floor. He leaves them for the silverfish to eat. After his shower, he checks his favorite porn sites before getting dressed. There are more than a thousand updates since he checked last night. He gets ready to

masturbate as he skims through the pictures and movies, but there's nothing he hasn't seen before. He makes scrambled eggs and toast for breakfast.

In the afternoon, he watches a show in which actors posing as lab assistants add chemicals to scientists' experiments to create humorous results, such as explosions that set the scientists on fire, or fumes that cause the scientists to hallucinate and call their department heads to tell them what they really think of their lab space. Carl wonders if the rash has something to do with his unemployment.

Carl has been out of a job for three months. He used to work in a lab himself, growing stem cells into human body parts to be used for transplants. Then his job was outsourced to a lab in Brazil. The manager who escorted Carl and his box of personal belongings out to the parking lot told him the new lab was run mainly by robots. It's just skin, he told Carl. It grows itself. The box of Carl's personal belongings still sits by the door, where he dropped it when he came that day.

Carl decides the rash is probably from a lack of exercise. He puts on a layer of sunscreen and goes for a long walk, past rows of coffee shops full of other unemployed people and bus stops with homeless men sleeping on the benches.

When he comes back, he is sunburned despite the sunscreen. He closes all the blinds and has a cool shower, but it doesn't do anything to soothe the burning in his skin. He goes to bed and has nightmares about a world in which the sun never sets and is always at high noon. He scratches at himself in his sleep. He doesn't see the skin flakes fall to the floor and skitter away. He doesn't see them eat the silverfish rather than the other way around. He doesn't see them join together into a blob and creep under the bed.

The next day, after peeling off more chunks of burned, dead skin and dropping them on the floor, where the blob consumes them when he's not looking, he goes to a walk-in clinic. He asks the doctor for cream for his rash and sunburn. She writes him a prescription to make them both go away. She tells him she saw a show about a rise in solar flares. She says maybe this could be the cause of the rash and burn. She says the sun is going to collapse in on itself and suck them all into it. She says it's going to be the opposite of the Big Bang. She says then things are supposed to start all over again.

Carl doesn't know if that means the world will never end or it will never begin. He asks the doctor if she made the show up, if it's really just a placebo. The doctor adds a note to the prescription and says she's stocking up on drugs for when the end comes. She says she doesn't think it'll be long now. She says Carl should make sure to use all of the cream. Carl thinks about the doctor naked on a porn site.

Carl goes to a nearby supermarket to get his prescription filled. The supermarket is identical to the one in his neighborhood. The pharmacy inside is in the same place as the one in his neighborhood. Even the pharmacists look the same. Carl looks at the magazine stand while he waits. All the same actors are on the covers. He doesn't even need to read the articles to know what they say.

When he goes home, the blob of skin has shaped itself into a small child, a toddler. It hides in the closet while he makes himself a sandwich. It eats little pieces of dandruff, forgotten hairs, a toenail, and grows larger.

Carl takes off his clothes and rubs the prescription cream all over his body. He doesn't want to get any on the couch, so he stands while he watches the latest episode of

Beat the Geeks. Actors pretending to be government officials present scientists with fake meteorites holding fake alien fossils. The scientists hold each other and cry.

The winning actor is announced at the end of each *Beat the Geeks* episode. The actors thank their agents and talk about how the show was a great opportunity. Videos behind them show the faces of the scientists when the hosts break their disguises as cops or university janitors or homeless people on the street and tell them the truth, that everything is fake.

Carl never watched *Beat the Geeks* when he was still employed as a lab assistant. He was afraid he'd see himself on it one day. But now he can't get enough of it. He'd watch it every waking minute if he could.

When he goes to sleep that night, the creature creeps to the side of his bed and breathes in his breath.

When Carl gets up in the morning, he finds the creature sitting on the couch, going through his box of personal belongings from the lab job. It's fully grown now, but not quite formed. Its skin looks melted, and hair juts out of its body in scattered clumps. But Carl can tell he's looking at himself. It's even wearing the pants and shirt he wore yesterday.

Carl stares at the creature and it stares back at him. He yells at the creature to get out of his place. It yells the same thing back at him. He says he's calling the cops. It says the same thing back to him. He calls the cops. It goes back to looking through the box.

By the time the police arrive, the creature has grown to look like Carl even more. He can't tell the difference between them anymore, and neither can the cops, two female

officers. One of them asks if Carl and the creature are twins. Carl says he doesn't know who or what this thing is, but he wants it gone. It says the same thing about him.

The cops ask for ID. Carl pulls out his wallet and shows them his driver's license. The creature pulls out a wallet of its own and shows them its license. Carl recognizes it as an old one he'd put in a box in the closet for safekeeping. The cops give Carl and the creature their business cards. They tell Carl he's going to have to work this out with himself and then they leave. Carl thinks about double dates.

He doesn't know what else to do, so he sits beside the creature on the couch. They look at each other for a while. Carl tells the creature he's not going anywhere. He doesn't have anywhere to go. It says the same thing back to him. They watch the news and a shopping show and a basketball game and more shopping shows. They watch tornadoes destroy trailer parks on a weather show, and they watch sharks attack scuba divers on a travel show. Then they watch the same news shows and shopping shows again.

During all this Carl notices the creature scratching a rash on its arm. His own rash is gone. He wonders if it was the cream or the shower. He wonders if maybe he's the creature, and it's him. Then he wonders if he's on a new show. Perhaps the new trend is making fun of the unemployed. He looks around for cameras but can't see any. But that doesn't mean they're not there.

That night, it crawls into bed with him. It lies on its side, facing away from him, and sleeps. He thinks about rubbing the prescription cream into its skin. He thinks maybe this will make it go away. But he's afraid to touch it.

In the morning, it wakes him up by telling him about the dream it had. The world was empty except for it. It wandered around the city streets, doing whatever it wanted —

eating food, taking clothes, driving cars. Never seeing another human being but its reflection in store windows. Carl had the same dream, but he doesn't say anything.

Carl watches the creature dress in one of his suits and put on his favorite tie. He watches it print off a resumé and leave. He stands at the window and watches it go down the street, then goes back to bed. He looks at the cops' cards and tries to masturbate. He thinks about the cameras. He can't get it up. He goes back to sleep.

He wakes in the afternoon but doesn't get out of bed. He thinks maybe the creature is gone for good now, but it comes back in the evening. Its tie is loose around its neck, and its breath smells of alcohol. It sits on the couch and stares at nothing. It's tough out there, it says after a while.

Carl heats them cans of soup for dinner. They don't speak as they eat. They go to bed together after dinner. Carl doesn't dream at all that night.

In the morning, the creature dresses in the same suit and puts on Carl's favorite tie again. It prints off more resúmes. It goes out the door and down the street again. Carl doesn't get out of bed. He lies there and doesn't think about anything.

When the creature comes home, it looks at all of Carl's porn sites. Carl closes his eyes. When he opens them again, the creature is sitting on the couch, but it's dressed in a different shirt and tie. Carl must have slept all night and the next day. The creature watches *Beat the Geeks*. Hidden cameras film cancer researchers watching a fake news show about a cure for cancer being found. The researchers cry. An actor comes into the room and says he's the head of human resources. He says the company won't be needing them anymore. The cancer researchers cry some more.

Carl sees the box of his personal belongings back by the door before he falls asleep.

When he wakes, it's night. He doesn't know how long he's been asleep this time, but he's sore all over and thirsty. He tries to sit up but he doesn't have the strength to move. There's enough light from *Beat the Geeks* in the other room that he can see the creature leaning over him, watching him. Its breath smells of alcohol. Its skin is sunburned, patches already peeling off.

It's a special episode of *Beat the Geeks*. The show secretly revisits the scientists it tricked earlier to see what's happened to them. The astrophysicist sits on the bench by the ocean, alone, staring up at the sky. He talks to himself, but the microphones can't pick his words out of the wind. The alien researchers study new meteorites. They keep the fake ones with fake alien fossils on a shelf in their lab. The fruit-fly researchers say fruit flies can conceive of an afterlife, but that doesn't mean they believe in it. The researchers say they'll keep up their tests.

Carl waits for the host of whatever show he's in to step out of the closet or climb in through the window and point to all the hidden cameras.

He imagines a world somewhere out there in the universe where he is alone, with no double lying beside him.

He imagines a world where he's still working in the lab, growing body parts for other people.

The creature leans down toward Carl, and he closes his eyes. He feels its breath on his lips.

He imagines a world where anything is possible.