

Strange Days

He clocked in at four and was already sweating from the blazing outside heat, but once six hit, the dinner rush began and his brow dripped like a gutter in April.

He stepped into the walk-in freezer for a short reprieve. On the other side of the large steel door was a bustling cook's line in the kitchen of an Italian restaurant. He scratched behind his ear and took in a deep breath. He exhaled and opened, then went back to the crackling fryers, keeping his head down as he walked. An order printed out to his left. He ripped the ticket and hung it up, disillusioned at the appendage he saw before him performing the task.

"Two Glubs and a bowl of mashed teeth," he shouted out down the line.

He turned to look at the ticket again, then curled his fingers up and down, mesmerized at how they worked.

"Uhh, hold on. I think I'm having a bit of a moment here. The heat must be getting to me." He stopped the first waiter to walk by. "What's wrong with your... Wait, why am I shouting?" He stared at the waiter's mouth, falling into his neck as if locked in eternal shock. "Can you ask Amanda to come back here for a second? Her latest order doesn't make sense."

The waitress disappeared behind the two wide double doors of the kitchen.

Amanda arrived and inspected the ticket. She nodded but looked confused.

"Amanda," he shouted, "this order doesn't make any sense."

"What do you mean?"

"What do I mean? What do *you* mean?"

She laughed and walked away, as if his question were nothing more than a joke.

"Order up," shouted one of the other cooks. He looked over and sure enough the absurd

request was sitting under the heat lamps waiting for Amanda.

“Excuse me a moment,” he shouted. “I need something to drink.” He left the line and walked out to the bar, only to discover the restaurant he knew had changed.

Where the red cushioned booths once lined the walls, he instead saw benches made from bones. Instead of families engaged in friendly commotion everyone was shouting at the top of their lungs. The bartender held a finger into the air to signal he'd be a minute.

“The usual, Shrii?” shouted the bartender, his voice like rocks in a blender.

“Uhh, yeah, yeah sure. Is everyone going deaf or something? What's going on?”

“You're a funny one, Shrii. One slimy gizzard ale coming right up.”

“It's ginger ale, but uhh, never mind.” He accepted the cup of foaming purple sludge and took his leave back to the kitchen. He sniffed the beverage and gagged before setting it down on the counter of the cook's line.

His manager walked by on his way to remind the dishwashers of an incoming party.

"Hey, Sam," shouted Shrii.

"Sam? What? Are you feeling okay, Shrii? Shriek will do just fine. What is it?"

"Your name is Shriek? The heat back here must be getting to me. I swear I'm dreaming."

"I've ordered that miniature fan you wanted. The one that straps to your shoulder like a parrot. You'll look like a damn fool, but you'll at least have a breeze."

Shrii didn't remember requesting such an accessory, but nodded and took his leave once more to the freezer, in need of another break from the heat to get his bearings.

He exited the freezer for the second time and took his spot on the line. He felt different, his movement constrained, but at the same time he couldn't feel himself moving at all. He looked over and noticed his co-workers had been replaced by robots.

“Oh come on...” he said, his voice like that of someone talking into an oscillating fan.

“Order up,” said one of the robo-cooks.

“But nothing even printed. What’s happening?”

“Orders are sent directly to the correct robo-cook,” replied Robo-Sam, the robo-manager.

“You know this, Robo-Phil. Did your last update cause a glitch?”

He looked down at his hands, a sound resembling a zipper pulling up to his neck accompanied his rising appendages. His fingers were composed of miniature rods with ball-pin joints. A pre-installed description of the word confusion scrolled across the screen that made up his mouth. Robo-Sam read the definition and beeped twice.

“Peculiar,” said Robo-Sam, “scrolling definitions were removed from our systems three updates ago. I’d like you to go home for the night. You don’t seem yourself. Plug in and update while you get a full charge. Tell Robo-Bethany I said hello.”

Robo-Phil walked out of the kitchen and into the foyer of the restaurant. He walked by a family of what looked like floating washing machines on his way to the door.

“Have a great night,” said the robo-hostess.

He drove home the usual route, in a car that hovered instead of rolled. He was unsure what his home would look like. He pulled into his driveway and got out of his car. Where a suburban home once stood, as far as he remembered, sat a green metallic orb which caught glare from the moon. He entered the orb through a door fitted to his exact stature which appeared as he got closer.

“Uhh, Betha...” he shook his head, “Robo-Bethany, I’m home.” His wife rolled out from the living room cradling a small radio in her arms.

“Shhh, you’ll wake Robo-Timothy. What’re you doing home so early?”

“Robo-Sam sent me home. Said I should get a full charge. Where do I usually plug in?”

“Plug in? We got wireless charging installed last month. Robo-Sam was right to send you home. You must have a glitch or something. Just go sit in your chair and turn on the telescreen. Just being in the room will charge you.”

He sat down in one of the two chairs in front of the telescreen. Beside one of the chairs was a small table with a bottle of aged oil and gun powder blend, it reminded him of his scotch so he took a seat. Written on the side of the bottle was “*With an explosive kick sure to spark your circuits*”. He hesitantly poured himself a glass and brought it to his mouth screen. As the glass grew closer the screen rose up. He drank it down and a numbing sensation ran through his circuits. He thought about turning the telescreen on and it flickered on. He thought about watching a drama and a drama came on.

“When you’ve got a bit of charge can you help me calm Robo-Timothy down when I plug him in?” asked Robo-Bethany, poking her head into the room via an elongated neck, her body still in the other room cradling their son.

“Of course.” He looked down at his arm. “I’m at eighty percent.”

“May as well give it a few more minutes until you’re full,” she replied.

When he reached full charge he followed her head into the other room. She stroked her hand against the wall and a small shelf came protruding outward. She placed Robo-Timothy on the shelf and held her husband’s hand.

“He looks adorable,” she said. “Don’t you agree?”

He looked down at the radio. It didn’t resemble anything remotely close to the son he remembered. He only saw a radio. The definition for confusion scrolled along his mouth, he covered it with his hand so Robo-Bethany wouldn’t see.

“Can you sing him a song?” she asked, plugging him in.

“Can he not benefit from the wireless?”

“Children need their pure energy. Now a song, something nice, please.”

“Let the energy course through your circuits,

this life of yours is a circus,

your mother and I both love you,

bless your bolts and your little screws,

get a full charge,

a healthy nourish,

for tomorrow your dreams will flourish.”

“That was quite lovely, Robo-Phil. Now that I have a moment I’m going to get a bit of a charge myself. What was that show you were watching? It looked interesting.”

“I’m not sure, but I’ll join you.”

The next morning he exited the orb. He wouldn’t need to be at work until later in the evening, which gave him the morning to explore the new world he’d found himself in.

Having Bethany and his son Timothy still by his side was a relief, although their robotic alter-egos baffled him. The last time he remembered things being normal was at work the other night before he entered into the freezer the first time. He stopped walking and rubbed his chrome dome with his hand. Something about the freezer last night must’ve done all this, he thought. Everything was fine until I entered that damn freezer. First there was everyone yelling as loud as they could, as if the world were engulfed in the roar of jet engines, and everyone looked as if they’d just seen a ghost. Now this world of machines. What could’ve caused this? A portal of some kind, a rift in dimensions? That’d be crazy. Such things are only fantasy. Right? The thoughts scrolled along his mouth which he kept covered as he strolled about the neighborhood.

Each of the neighbor's houses had been replaced with orbs of various colors. The sizes varied as well, something he attributed to wealth or status. He glanced back at his orb, the size of it seemed in the middle range. He was pleased.

Later that night he returned to work and took his place at the head of the cook's line. Robo-Sam walked over to him and place a hand on his shoulder plate.

"Feeling better today?" asked Robo-Sam.

"Much better. Thanks for letting me take off early last night. It helped a lot."

"Sure thing. Glad to have you back to your old self. We'll be needing you at your best. Robo-Rick disappeared last night. The lazy bucket of bolts."

"I'd better get to preparing the line."

"Sure thing. Good luck tonight. We have a party of twenty coming in at eight."

As the other cooks tended to their areas he walked over to the freezer.

The freezer door stood before him like a mesmerizing monolith. What lurked on the other side? He creaked the door open and stepped in. Nothing looked awry as green beams emitting from his eyes scanned the area. He exited the freezer hoping things would be returned to normal, but instead they grew even stranger. He found himself swimming through a cerulean hued goop. He examined his arms and hands, which were now covered in flaky scales. He rubbed his hand against them, his skin like the bristles on the back of his neck after a haircut. He took his spot on the line and inspected his co-workers as they placed clumps of algae and snails onto plates before putting them on the shelf in front of them. The waiters and waitresses would swim up and fetch their orders as more would be dropped off onto the counter by small fish.

"Gill, are you okay?"

He turned around and saw another version of his manager.

“Gill? Huh, that’s clever.” He set down a seashell he was reading--an order from.

“Excuse me?”

“Nothing, just umm.” He stared at his manager trying to think of what his name may be.

"Saaaaaamarine?"

“Don’t be weird, Gill. We don't have time for games. It’s still Shark. Don’t forget about the party coming at eight.”

“Sure thing.”

At the end of the night he swam home to discover an array of coral lining the streets where his orb once stood. He entered into the coral about where his house would be and called out for his wife.

“Bethany? Who the hell is Bethany?” asked a woman resembling his wife, in regards to her face more than anything else.

“Oh right. What's your name here?”

“It’s Bubbles and don’t let the neighbors hear you having an episode. Now come along. I’m getting Tidy ready for his metabolic resting period.”

He swam behind her into their son’s corner of the coral.

“Would you sing him a song?” she asked. “He’s been restless all night.”

He nodded.

*“Swim away within your mind,
there are dreams in there you must find,
the biggest ones are worth the most,
do all you can to hold them close,
for when you twitch upon the morning rise,*

*you'll be surprised,
life can be whatever you wish,
because you're not just any fish,
you're our dark day remedy,
our brave sea anemone."*

The next night he returned to work. He swam up to the freezer and pulled on the handle, but it was locked. He swam around until he found Shark.

"What's up with the freezer?" he asked. "I need to get something."

"One of the cooks went in there last night and never returned. We're not sure what's happened. We have someone coming in tomorrow morning to take a look. The freezer is locked until then. The menu has been updated, I've put a list by each station."

"An expert? An expert on what?"

"You'll think I'm crazy," said Shark. "I've a hunch, but I'm not sure."

"What's your hunch?"

"Wavis entered the freezer and disappeared, which isn't normal in the least. I think there may be some kind of portal in there. Somehow Wavis triggered it and slipped into another location, or perhaps even another world."

"Or another dimension," said Gill. "One parallel to this one, but altered. One where the people are the same on the inside, but everything is different on the outside."

"That's quite precise. Perhaps that's possible as well. Would you like to be here when the expert arrives? I found him listed on the fishing line."

"I would very much like that."

"Good. He'll be here at nine tomorrow morning. Now get everything set on the cook's line."

We open for dinner soon.”

The next morning he returned to work just as the expert was arriving. He opened the door for the blowfish sized man.

“What do you think might be happening with the freezer?” asked Gill.

“Hard to say until I’ve taken a look. Are you the man I spoke with on the conch?”

“No. That was Shark, my manager. I’m Phi, I mean Gill. Sorry, haven’t had my morning salt water yet.”

“Pleasure to make your acquaintance, Gill. I’m Planktom.”

Shark met them in the kitchen as the two were looking at the locked door. He pulled a swordfish shaped key from his belt and unlocked the freezer.

“Hmm, very strange,” muttered Planktom.

“What is it?” asked Gill.

“Well I can’t be certain, but I’m getting a very strange vibe from this room. You were right to contact me, Shark. There is most certainly something amiss here. Care to come along, Gill?”

“To where?”

“Only one way to find out, isn’t there?”

The two walked into the freezer and shut the door behind them.

“Nothing seems off in here,” said Planktom.

“Just wait until we open the door.”

“Why do you say that?”

“I’ve been in here before. Thrice now I’ve traveled to different versions of my own world.”

“Are you being serious? That’s fascinating. Well, now I’m excited to get out.”

They opened the door and stepped out onto a white dirt covered floor. Phil looked over at

Dan Leicht

his comrade, and then inspected his own attire, which matched his new friend's. They were both dressed in yellow jumpsuits with black rubber boots and gloves. They had on helmets with clear plastics shields covering their faces.

"Probably best we leave these masks on," said Phil. "These worlds tend to dress you accordingly. What should I call you here?"

"What do you mean? Am I not still Planktom?"

"Each world so far has given me a different name. I'm never aware of them either. Usually someone will tell me. Wait until Sam, or Shark as you know him, addresses me. Make up a name with a similar connotation."

"Philstar? What're you doing here so early? And who are you?"

"I'm, ummm, Startom."

Samoon gave them both a peculiar look.

"Not sure what you and your friend are doing here, Philstar. I could use your help, though. One of my guys went missing last night. Richearth says the last he saw Kensun was when he was on his way to fetch something from the freezer. I was on my way over to lock the door until I can get a hold of someone who can take a look. I have a hunch that--well, you'll think I'm crazy."

"You're not crazy. And your hunch is right. I come from another world. A world like this one, but so very different as well. Startom here can vouch for me. He's the expert you contacted in the previous world."

"What he's saying is true," said Startom. "I believe there's an inter-dimensional portal within your freezer which is triggered by the opening and closing of the door."

"What? I was just in there last night and I came out of there just fine," replied Samoon.

"Something must trigger it then," said Philstar. "We have to figure out what that is. It may

be my only way home.”

“Well if you’re really an expert I’ll leave you both to it then. I want to know what happened to Kensun. I hope he’s all right. He makes the best sky-cakes I’ve ever had.”

The two turned to the freezer and looked at one another. They both knew what would happen if they entered it again, that they’d only find themselves in another world and be forced to explain themselves all over again. The idea that a man went missing in each of the worlds intrigued Phil. He must be the one that had gone missing from his own world. Were other versions of his co-workers all experiencing the same things he was? Were they hopping from world to world in increasing panic trying to find their way home.

“What do you think we should do?” asked Philstar.

“We can’t enter. For all we know it’s triggered by certain people only. We have the pleasure of being those certain people. I wonder if perhaps...” He inspected the hinges on the door. “What if we removed the door and placed it onto another room?”

“It’s worth a shot, but what’s your endgame with that? Just to see if it’s the door only?”

“It’d be the scientific discovery of the century. Could you imagine? We’d make millions. A door capable of transporting someone to a new life? Worlds thought to be only imagination becoming a brand new existence.?”

“Getting home to my family. The one I know. That’s worth more to me than millions.”

“Nonsense. You have a family here. Which makes me think--have you seen any other versions of yourself?”

“No. Each time I leave work and head home another version of my wife is waiting for me to sing our child to sleep.”

“You sing? Care to share a song with me?”

“It’s hardly an appropriate time. Let’s get to removing this door. Maybe if we attach it to another room we can control where it leads us.”

“It’s worth a shot. Do you know where they keep a toolkit here?”

Philstar walked over to the dishwasher’s station and pulled a small plastic bin from the large metal shelf where the clean silverware was kept. He opened it to reveal a peculiar set of tools and walked it over to Startom.

“What am I to do with this?” asked Startom, holding up a chrome cube the size of a marble. He sifted through the other objects in the bin, all of which were chrome objects of various shapes and sizes.

“Give it here,” said Philstar. He tapped the cube on the top hinge and it melted down, covering the hinge completely. He then tapped the hinge with his finger and it fell off. He repeated the task with two other cubes until he could remove the door from its frame.

“Well, that’s all well and good, Philstar, but now how are we going to attach it to the other frame?”

“I’m sure there’s a cube for that.” He picked three small prisms from the bin and placed them into Startom’s hand. “Hold these and follow me. He picked up the door and walked it about twenty feet to the prep room.

The prep room was a small room with no door and a large table in the middle of it. Lining the walls were shelves stocked with, at least in Philstar's own world, cans of various broths and sauces. He placed the door beside the entrance to the room against the wall.

“What do you expect to do with these?” asked Startom, holding the three prisms.

“Well if the cubes melt, then perhaps we’ll have some luck with the prisms. I noticed the hinges on the door didn’t look like normal hinges. In this world I think these objects are intended to

replace tools all together.” He placed the door into the frame of the open room. “Hand me one.” He placed the prism on the side of the doorframe at the top and it sunk into the side of the door as if a hot iron touching wax. He continued the process. Once the door was secure he looked over his shoulder at Startom and stepped inside. “Are you ready?” His companion nodded. He shut the door.

“Dare we open it and take a look at the other side?” asked Startom.

“Hold on a second. We need to control this. Let’s think about where we need to go. You need to get back to the world of goop. I need—”

“World of goop? Is that what you think of my world?”

“Startom, stay on track here. Let’s both focus on your world for a moment.”

They stood in silence. After a few moments Startom opened the door and walked into the goop of his home world. Philstar pushed him forward and shut the door, closing himself inside. He held onto the handle from his side as Startom insistently pulled from the other.

Startom pounded on the door. “What’re you doing?” he shouted. “We’re in this together now. With your cooperation we can become the richest men on earth. We’ve discovered something amazing here.”

“You can do all that on your own,” shouted Philstar. “I need to see my family.”

Philstar closed his eyes and tried to concentrate. The door continued to rattle as he thought about his wife and child, the way he remembered them. As he pictured them in his mind the door stopped shaking. He let the handle go and took in a long breath. He opened the door and exited into a familiar world.

“What the hell did you do?” shouted Sam.

“What?” replied Phil.

“Why is the freezer door in the prep room? What’re you even doing here? You go missing for two days and show up out of the blue messing with the freezer door? Fix this right now,” barked Sam. “You have two hours before the other cooks arrive. Don’t think for a second I’m paying you for this either.”

Phil nodded and grabbed the toolkit from the shelf at the dishwasher’s station.

“You’re on tonight too. Ken's wife called and said he's been missing too. Any idea where he is?”

"Sorry, I..."

"It's fine. I know you're a good boy. Get to work on that door."

At the end of the workday he returned home, wary of how his wife would greet him due to his absence. He unlocked the door and stepped inside to find her sitting alongside a pair of police officers as Timothy whimpered in the other room.

“Phil!” she ran over to him and wrapped her arms around him.

He held her close and patted her head with his hand. A long tongue extended from her snout and she licked the side of his face with glee.

“I was worried sick about you.” She turned around and walked back over to the officers, assuring them everything was all right and they could take their leave.

“Timothy hasn’t been sleeping.” She slapped him across the snout. “Where've you been?”

“I’m sorry, it’s hard to explain. I didn’t mean for any of this to happen, but I uhh,” he scratched behind his ear, “at the end of my shift I quit my job at the restaurant. Something didn’t feel right.”

“You can explain yourself in the morning.” She turned away from him. “For now I need you to sing Timothy a song. He needs his rest more than you do.”

Phil nodded and accompanied her to the other room. He looked down and placed his hand against their pup's furry face.

"I'm here for you now,

I'll never leave,

I stepped through a door for which I grieve,

I've seen other lives,

other worlds,

other tales,

none of which are amazing as the one I know well.

To be at your side,

watching you rock back and forth,

this is where I belong,

where I seek,

my own precious earth."