

thrice great hermes

#61

by stanley lieber

étienne had thought he was alone in the central office. a flicker of movement on his monitor caught his eye, but upon closer inspection he could see no one on any of the cameras. he unlocked the door to his office and ventured into the front reception area.

bill was asleep on the couch. the air reeked of marijuana. bill had spilled his beer all over the carpet. he was out cold. étienne tested the theory by lifting bill's arm and dropping it right on his chest. nothing. no response. bill was a coworker. another technician who covered his offices and shacks during the night shift, which commenced presently. so be it.

étienne logged out and headed home. the snow was starting up again, and he didn't want to waste time trying to rouse bill from whatever had befallen him. he managed to squeak into his garage before the roads got bad. he was thankful he had a garage.

he popped open his leaf and propped it up on his knees, trying to stay awake to finish his movie before it was time for bed. violet stirred uncomfortably and he decided that, anyway, he was too tired to continue. he lay awake staring into the darkness right up until he didn't.

he had remembered something, earlier in the evening, about grandpa's old house. he couldn't remember now, but it had been something he had intended to write down before he left work. oh well, figure it out in the morning.

up, out of bed, and back to work. the days linked together in a regular, predictable progression, a chain that was connected to nothing. pulling... what, exactly? probably nothing. that was why it was so easy. by now étienne had straightened out his own office, and a few of the remotes besides. the biggest problem was the techs who worked during the day. they didn't do things the way he did things. he spent a lot of time fixing mistakes, re-doing work they had already finished and closed out. he supposed there was someone providing the same service, for him, catching his mistakes, fixing his errors. maybe it was bill.

he began leaving little notes.

hands off the tv dinners

and

flush the fucking toilet

he printed out and hung a photograph of an early atomic test on the inside of a men's room stall.

soon enough, notes from others began to appear.

tonight, he hung up an article from an nsa internal publication, circa 1974: guidesmanship: how to write technical manuals without actually giving anything away.

then he sat down to work on the manual.