

THE SEPTEMBER THAT ENDED

by Stanley Lieber

30 September 2099
20:20:20 EDT

TAB2 sat in the house trailer and wondered why he had returned again to the only place where he had ever felt truly unlike himself. Who wrote this shit, anyway?

A quick sweep of the premises had yielded no comics or other items of interest. Switching to infrared: Same result. Why was he here?

This was not his home. Hadn't even visited the place in years. When last he had bothered—the ninth grade?—Christopher had not even been home.

He rolled over on his pallet bed. Urine soaked trousers. Good thing he was alone. Stuck his leg out of his sleeping bag and felt for the gross carpeting of the living room floor.

It was there.

21:18:23 EDT

BLACK, YELLOW, PURPLE, WHITE, WHITE, WHITE, WHITE, WHITE, GRAY, WHITE, BLACK, BLUE, WHITE, BLACK, RED, WHITE, WHITE, BLACK, WHITE, BLACK, ORANGE, BLACK, YELLOW, ORANGE, BLACK, ORANGE, BROWN, WHITE, WHITE, PURPLE, WHITE, BLACK, WHITE, WHITE, BLACK, WHITE, WHITE, WHITE, WHITE, PURPLE, WHITE, BLACK, WHITE, WHITE, WHITE, BLUE, WHITE, BLACK, BLACK, WHITE, WHITE, WHITE, WHITE, WHITE, BLACK, WHITE, BLACK, WHITE, WHITE, BLACK, BLUE, BLACK, BROWN, YELLOW, WHITE, WHITE, RED, BLACK, BROWN, PURPLE, WHITE, BLACK, WHITE, WHITE, BLACK, WHITE, WHITE, WHITE, BLACK, WHITE, WHITE, GRAY, WHITE, BLACK, RED, WHITE, WHITE, BLACK, WHITE, BLACK, ORANGE, WHITE, BLACK, WHITE, WHITE, BLACK, BLACK, WHITE, WHITE, BROWN, WHITE, BLACK, RED, WHITE, WHITE, GRAY, WHITE, BLACK, BLUE, WHITE, BLACK, PURPLE, WHITE, BLACK, WHITE, WHITE, BLACK, ORANGE, BLACK, BROWN, YELLOW, WHITE, BLACK, PURPLE, WHITE, BLACK, RED, WHITE, WHITE, GRAY, WHITE, GREEN, WHITE, BLACK, BLUE, GRAY.

The black box attached to the inside of the front door emitted a long strip of white paper printed with an assortment of colored blocks. Also, sound. TAB2 listened politely for as long as he could muster before it was once again time to shut the box. He closed the lid carefully and sat quietly in the dark. Queasy.

His hands ached.

TBQH, all of him ached.

Flash on an image of his father being helped up, then down, the hospital hallway.

Scroll.

What was it Piro had said about these intrusive images? "Uriel was right," or something along those lines.

Scroll.

Well, he couldn't remember.

Scroll.

Scroll.

Scroll.

Scroll.

21:35:24 EDT

Through the plastic window TAB2 stared at the horizon. The long, winding strip of colored blocks advanced, curling around his slippers, accumulating in tangles throughout the house trailer. Tom reached into his pocket and pulled out... There had been nothing in his pocket.

He poured a finger of RED KOOL-AID™ into his blue plastic tumbler and swallowed it in one gulp.

Along the wide horizon he sensed the approach of stiff, dark clouds.

"I can feel it die," he said to himself.

And then:

"Oo-o, Oo-o."

22:23:05 EDT

The gravel road stretched around the house trailer, curving gently into the wan light beyond the trees.

Eyes followed road. At the limits of his vision, just inside the horizon, he saw them.

One twister made of light too bright to look at directly. Beside it, seeming almost to be an after image of the first, a second twister, made of total darkness, nothing within it being discernible at all.

The two twisters were advancing toward the trailer.

23:07:09 EDT

Presently, the black box spoke to him audibly.

WHITE, BLACK, BLUE, WHITE, WHITE, GRAY, WHITE, WHITE, GRAY, WHITE,
WHITE, GREEN, BLACK, RED, PURPLE, BLACK, BLUE, YELLOW, BLACK, BLUE,
YELLOW, WHITE, BLACK, RED, BLACK, BROWN, YELLOW, GRAY, BLACK, WHITE,
BLUE, BLACK, BLACK, BLACK, BLUE, GRAY, WHITE, WHITE, YELLOW, WHITE,
WHITE, RED, BLACK, BLUE, GRAY, BLACK, BROWN, YELLOW, WHITE, WHITE,
BLUE, BLACK, BROWN, BROWN, WHITE, BLACK, BLUE, WHITE, BLACK, RED,
WHITE, WHITE, PURPLE, WHITE, BLACK, WHITE, BLACK, BLUE, GRAY, WHITE,
WHITE, WHITE, WHITE, WHITE, BLUE, WHITE, BLACK, ORANGE, BLACK, BLUE,
YELLOW, GREEN, BLACK, BLUE, YELLOW, WHITE, BLACK, RED, WHITE, WHITE,
GRAY, WHITE, BLACK, WHITE, WHITE, BLACK, BROWN, WHITE, WHITE, RED,
BLACK, BLUE, YELLOW, BLACK, GRAY, RED, WHITE, WHITE, BLUE, BLACK,
BROWN, PURPLE, WHITE, BLACK, WHITE, WHITE, BLACK, RED, WHITE, WHITE,
GRAY, BLACK, BROWN, RED, BLACK, YELLOW, YELLOW, BLACK, BROWN,
YELLOW, BLACK, BROWN, BROWN, WHITE, BLACK, BLUE, WHITE, WHITE,
GRAY, BLACK, BROWN, RED, BLACK, YELLOW, BLACK, WHITE, WHITE, BLUE,
WHITE, BLACK, WHITE, WHITE, BLACK, RED, BLACK, BROWN, RED, WHITE,
WHITE, RED, WHITE, BLACK, RED, WHITE, BLACK, BLACK, WHITE, BLACK,
WHITE, BLACK, BROWN, RED, BLACK, BROWN, PURPLE, BLACK, BLUE,
YELLOW, BLACK, GRAY, RED, WHITE, WHITE, BLUE, BLACK, BROWN, PURPLE,
WHITE, BLACK, WHITE, WHITE, BLACK, RED, WHITE, WHITE, GRAY, BLACK,
BROWN, RED, BLACK, YELLOW, YELLOW, BLACK, BROWN, YELLOW, BLACK,
BROWN, BROWN, WHITE, BLACK, BLUE, WHITE, WHITE, GRAY, BLACK,
BROWN, RED, BLACK, YELLOW, BLACK, WHITE, WHITE, BLUE, WHITE, BLACK,
WHITE, WHITE, BLACK, RED, BLACK, BLUE, RED, WHITE, WHITE, RED,
WHITE, BLACK, RED, WHITE, BLACK, BLACK, WHITE, BLACK, WHITE, BLACK,
BROWN, RED, BLACK, BROWN, PURPLE, BLACK, BLUE, RED, BLACK, PURPLE,
BLUE, WHITE, WHITE, BLUE, BLACK, BROWN, YELLOW, BLACK, BROWN,
BROWN, WHITE, BLACK, YELLOW, BLACK, BROWN, RED, BLACK, GREEN,
BLACK, BLUE, RED, BLACK, PURPLE, BLUE, WHITE, BLACK, BLUE, WHITE,
BLACK, WHITE, BLACK, BROWN, RED, BLACK, GRAY, YELLOW, WHITE, BLACK,
BLUE, WHITE, BLACK, RED, WHITE, WHITE, BLACK, WHITE, BLACK, WHITE,
WHITE, WHITE, RED, WHITE, BLACK, WHITE, BLACK, BROWN, RED, BLACK,
PURPLE, GREEN, WHITE, WHITE, WHITE, WHITE, WHITE, WHITE, WHITE,
BLACK, BROWN, BLACK, BROWN, RED, WHITE, WHITE, PURPLE, BLACK,
BROWN, PURPLE, WHITE, WHITE, BLUE, BLACK, BLUE, GRAY, WHITE, BLACK,
BROWN, WHITE, WHITE, GREEN, ORANGE.

The spiraling strip of paper continued to spool on the floor.

Came a knock at the door. Since no other human beings had fouled the Earth for some decades, the knocking could only have been caused by the wind. To wit: The apparently approaching twisters.

"It's not even my trailer!" pleaded TAB2.

He grasped at his visor, his window to the world, panicking. Slapped at the black box until the lid once again closed.

Blessed silence.

But the problem remained. Not talking about it, not believing in it, had not made the problem go away.

"Magic without intentionality," he suggested, futilely.

He knew this was not going to work.

23:17:02 EDT

TAB2 approached the outsize projection television and switched on the attached SEGA MASTER SYSTEM™. He loaded a save state from a popular JRPG and wandered around the world map until he was killed by a (frankly) stupid looking monster.

Tossing the controller on the floor, he picked up the television's remote control and attempted to— Right, no cable, no broadcasts.

At the window, the twisters had progressed on their journey down the road toward the trailer. Tom didn't want to think about it, so he didn't.

The house trailer rocked gently in the accelerating wind.

23:23:23 EDT

One day, Christopher's cousin Jason had attempted to push the trailer over with his bare hands.

Standing in the unmowed grass wearing nothing but camouflage surplus trunks and a thick gold rope necklace, Jason had flexed his twelve-year-old muscles and pressed his hands against the side of the trailer until his face had turned red.

All assembled had laughed, as the trailer had not moved.

Jason had become angry, and the irregular corona of his curly brown hair had seemed to expand on his head.

Tom thought of this and smiled, uselessly.

23:59:59 EDT

The black box:

BLACK, GRAY, BROWN, BLACK, YELLOW, PURPLE, BLACK, GRAY, PURPLE, BLACK,
PURPLE, ORANGE, BLACK, GRAY, BROWN, BLACK, PURPLE, BLACK, BLACK,
PURPLE, BLUE, BLACK, GRAY, BROWN, BLACK, YELLOW, YELLOW, BLACK, GRAY,
GRAY, BLACK, GRAY, BROWN, BLACK, PURPLE, GREEN.

TAB2 was beside himself. There had not been enough warning. There would be no time to complete any of his several unfinished projects.

Additionally, the paperwork was going to be a nightmare. He found an ink pen on the kitchen table, clicked it once, then set it back down again. Swept his arm across the table, knocking the stacks of papers every which way on the kitchen floor. Fucking bureaucracy.

He glanced at the black box and then pressed his face against the plastic window, screaming forcefully, though no sound could escape from the tight seal formed by his lips. He pulled his face away from the window and stared at the ring of moisture abjured by his silent shout. The window seemed to be mocking him so he punched it, injuring his knuckle in the process. Even his invulnerability was no longer a certainty.

He considered the fact that his entire life had been a fiction, conceived hesitantly, in fits and spurts, with long gaps between installments, by a human being who could never find much time to write. He wondered what that guy was doing, right now.

Spurred by this thought, he flashed on a spontaneous idea. A solution? Traipsed through the paperwork and the coils of paper strips to the front door. Threw open the portal and shouted into the *aether*:

"I'm the protagonist, I can't d—"

END SEPTEMBER