

Real

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An eleven-page story I wrote from January 2006 to January 2007, about the adventures of two teens, set in the year 2038. There are a few pictures that are supposed to be in it, and there's no paragraphing, but otherwise it's all there. Enjoy!

Provided by Fanart Central.

<http://www.fanart-central.net/stories/user/spasticsurgeon2009/43824/Real>

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1 - (full story)

for the united states of america
and its few intelligent inhabitants

REAL

H Floyd

edited by J Bluff

The megabus screamed to a standstill in front of my house, the piston brakes hissing and dribbling black fluid onto the road. I hauled myself up the gray, rubbery steps, mock-saluted the guard slouching in the back, and dropped myself into a thin brown seat with knifemarks running the length of it. I heard the doors slam shut behind me. I didn't bother plugging in the virtual reality set nailed into the back of the seat. Painful as it was, I preferred reality.

The diesel engine wheezed and roared with a deafening rumble, pressing me back into the dirty seat,

belching clouds of black exhaust fumes up into the carbon cloud. The bus slowly climbed forward, the suspension cracking and creaking, the damp floor vibrating under my feet.

I looked down, then up at the gray steel roof of the bus. I studied each individual rusty screw, rattling around in their rusty old sockets.

I was getting tired of the old Scituate school system—ever since "*Jack Zellow*" appeared on the ninth grade roster, I'd been regretting the decision. Run by a box of hollowly liberal hologram projectors. Well, I get to see Adam, of course, but that's just about the extent of it.

The megabus tore around a corner, shocks creaking and hissing. It crawled up to the front of the school and ground slowly to a halt. The doors snapped open, and I heaved my old backpack up from underneath the seat and slung it across my shoulder. As soon as I stepped into the aisle I was swept down the center of the bus by the mob of highschoolers and down the steps. I gazed up at the old brick school, plastered high with Sony billboards and iPod 3D posters. I shivered as the bus brakes spat something cold in my face.

I burst through the doors just in time to see Adam leap from the top of the escalator onto the floor below. He landed hard on his back, rolling over several times. "Adam!" A camera on the ceiling swiveled and blipped as a crowd of kids swarmed around, obstructing my vision all but for Adam shaking his head nonchalantly with his famous smirk. His short brown hair was uncombed, his shirt too big for him. The director soon appeared in the hallway with a look on his face that somehow implied he had been here many times before.

I turned around and strolled lightly through the metal detector, which was probably as old and broken as the escalator was. I headed down the long white corridor, a camera on the wall swiveling around to follow me. The banged-up, mashed-up lockers slid past my peripheral vision like a movie background. The camera was sliding across the groove along the top of the wall, following my every step until I reached locker 242. I took out my safepack and turned off the help screen. I shook it loudly to make sure my books hadn't been stolen yet. I jogged drowsily back down the corridor, turning clumsily into my homeroom and dropping myself heavily into my seat. Glancing at yet another camera resting on the bookshelf, I noticed Adam at the corridor window.

I hear people used to imagine holograms of the future as being cool and modern and stuff—no such luck. I stared glazily at a battered-looking, lightbulb-shaped projector hanging from an orange extension cord. It shone down a faint off-white image, flickering on and off incessantly, depicting a generic-looking teacher in a suit.

"Good morning Scituate. Today is November 7, 2039," wheezed the metallic recorded voice of the hologram. "Please stand for the Revised Pledge. I pledge allegiance..." The lines thereafter began sounding strange and garbled, which meant either the hologram was finally cracking or I was falling asleep again. Which isn't terribly rare in a high school.

"Please stand to honor the victims of Gulf War Three," continued the steely voice. At this point there was a lot of rude hissing and coughing noises from the students.

"Beginning attendance roll. BEEEP! Abrams. (BLIP.) Anderson. (BLIP.)..."

(I am a professional sound sorter. I can pick out certain sounds, and tune out other ones. Nowadays, I find myself doing an awful lot of the latter.)

"...Zellow. BEEEP! Attendance over," and then hastily added, "Remember that Algebra classes have been cut until fee week. Have nrrrghhhh—" The projector suddenly snapped, showering sparks over the classroom and hissing loudly. I took this as meaning it was time for first period.

Four hours later, a dented aluminum arm swung out, nearly knocking me off my feet, with my lunch on a

Styrofoam tray—burger, fries, chips, candy bar. Same as it's been for the last forty years. I inserted a twenty into a slot that looked vaguely like it was meant for putting twenties in. It clunked, banged, and shot three rusty coins at my forehead, which started to bleed profusely. I made my way over to the table Adam was at and sat down slowly, grimacing at my meal.

I cautiously picked up the small hamburger—it felt (and looked) like paper, whitish, crinkly, and delicate. I put it halfheartedly to my mouth. It tasted like paper too.

"What do you think they make these burgers out of?" I shivered, removing the burger from my mouth and placing the entire tray in the table's central garbage capsule. I pressed the "Dispose" button, expecting the capsule to shoot up through the overhead tubes and into the trash, like it does every day. This didn't happen, so I punched it, whacked it with my chair a few times, and then gave up. A few kids looked over at me, then turned back to their meal.

Adam was talking to a skinny kid at another table.

The cafeteria smelt chokingly of grease and mustard. The whirring sound of the aluminum serving arms working in unison mingled strangely with the deafening sound of a thousand kids stuffing themselves with junk food, and the occasional distant-sounding intercom announcement. The dirty yellow walls, caked with various desserts, seemed to cave in on themselves, making the room seem even more crowded than it actually was. And it was crowded to the bursting point. Crowded to the point where the ripped-up Maximum Occupancy sign on the floor was crying itself to sleep.

"So, this is what's become of 'our nation's coffeehouse', eh, Adam?" I sighed. He made a face, staring at the empty table in front of him.

I left the cafeteria to throw up.

I stared at the old clock in the Politics room. I hate time. I despise it. The clock stared back at me. Two black arms crawling ever so menacingly over a starch-white paper face. Just like everybody... paper face... the thin red second hand seeming to slow down, then go backwards, teasing me with its unruly innocence.

"Zellow. Take out the book, please." I kicked the safepack (once again cracking the Unbreakable Screen) and the Politics book fell out. "Section nine!" screeched the metallic voice, shining a light in my face. I slammed the book open on the desk.

Adam had once again appeared at the hallway window. He winked at me and held up his school PDA. I shook my head and looked down at mine. "Arizona." From Adam. I stared at him. He sent the message again. "Arizona." I stared at the pixilated message on the screen, watching it appear several more times, before seeing a new entry: "Grad Day."

"Pay attention!" yelled the hologram. A couple of kids snickered. I shook my head, took out a pen and began to write.

"Over the past ten years, the Senate has passed several..." The hologram read from its programmed script as we scribbled it down onto our PDAs. My brain momentarily switched off as I subconsciously transferred the information onto the screen.

I was thinking back to sixth grade, when Adam had convinced me to escape during lunch time to an open field in the woods nearby. We had sat down on the scratchy white grass, reading various things and talking philosophy amongst ourselves.

Once again, the blaring light shone in my face. "Zellow!" hissed the holographic teacher. I sat up straight and blinked. "Zellow! Answer to question 1B!" I searched frantically up and down the page, looking for—but the teacher had already called on someone else.

The day was unsettling, to say the least. And to make it even more unsettling, I don't know why it was unsettling. True, graduation day was in just a few days, but the school seemed—more—different. The

walls seemed to look at me strangely, like they knew who I was... the rooms seemed too square. Something weird was happening. The clocks ticked in unison. The aluminum lunch arms swung out in unison. The kids moved through their classes in unison. The holograms spoke in unison. Our brains rotted in unison.

I burst out of the classroom, swept up by the mob of kids hurrying to their lockers. I dashed up the stairs, half running, half swimming in the crowd, and found my locker. I fumbled with the lock, switched safepacks, and dashed back down the corridor. As I got to the end of the hall, I slipped and ran into my next class.

Adam was already there, of course, but I had expected that, even as fast as I had gone, he runs like hell. He smiled in the corner of his mouth, trying not to look at me.

I sat to the right of him and unlocked the safepack.

I looked through the old bus window, and it looked through me. Droplets of muddy water slid past on the dirty steel windowpane, shivering with the vibration of the bus as if they could still feel the cold outside. The red light at the back of the bus bored through the evening darkness like a drill. The faint noise of the virtual realities around me was intoxicating, like white noise.

I stumbled off the megabus, slipped on a puddle of ice, and narrowly avoided the bumper of a speeding Mustang. I launched myself up the stairs, through the screen door, and into the small empty house. I unlocked my safepack and threw it across the table, smashing the cheap vase that had so recently been resting upon it to pieces. I picked up a superball and walked into my room.

I tossed and turned on my rotisserie of a bed. American Dream. I had heard these words somewhere. A history book, perhaps. Or—had Adam said something about it? I pressed my face into my pillow. It sounded like something he would say. I rolled onto my back and closed my eyes.

* * *

A fierce December wind screamed across the deserted school parking lot. The faint sound of diesel engines whispered in the distance. I shuffled around under the overhang outside the school waiting for the bus that I felt would never come.

I scraped a piece of gum off a wall to read what was inscribed in the dusty gray plaque that lay underneath.

SCITUATE HIGH SCHOOL

1949

In honor of ?????

I was struggling to read the names under the thick graffiti, when suddenly there was a bang from behind me as Adam plowed through the doors.

"Jack!" he wheezed. He waved a clenched hand over to the parking lot. He took the ePhone out of his hand and turned it on. He tapped the screen a few times and showed me.

I looked up at him.

"It's Arizona," I said.

"Yes," he said bluntly. I raised my eyebrows. The screen went black and he began walking out into the

parking lot, his boots clunking with every step.

"Adam—" I followed him quickly—"What's with Arizona?"

"We're going there," he said decisively, stopping suddenly in front of what must have been his car. He opened the doors, motioning for me to get in.

"Wh—*me!*?" I laughed, looking at him as if he had nine heads, and he returned with another expression of his own.

"Yes, sir," said Adam. "The American Dream!" he exclaimed, flailing his arms wildly and looking to the horizon.

I looked at him strangely again. "But I—"

Adam stood silently in the wind like a statue, boring into me with his insanely blue eyes.

* * *

I woke up to the whistling sound of an oxygenator, which Adam had probably duct-taped to the muffler of the car. I sat up in the leather seat, gathering up my sanity and filing it neatly around my brain.

"What do you think, eh?" he asked, almost as if he were proud of having accomplished something, as soon as he noticed I was awake.

"I..." I couldn't answer. I was so amazed that I was actually in a car, driving to—well, supposedly Arizona... I couldn't talk. I looked in the side mirror—no cop lights. I looked in his eyes—that same intense blue flash. I sighed, raising my eyebrows, and lowered the seat again.

I woke up the second time to Beethoven roaring on the radio. I chuckled sleepily, giving Adam a start.

"Oh, it's you again," he joked.

"I guess," I replied.

There was an unsettlingly long silence.

"What state are we in?"

"I don't know."

More unsettlingly long silence. I stared out the window, watching the empty road speed by in the dark, the garbage heaps slipping by on the side of the highway. I rolled down the window, and upon smelling the foul stench of the carbon cloud and the battering of the dirty snow, rolled it back up.

"What'd you wanna do?" I sighed, looking to Adam. He stayed silent, as I expected.

I looked at the digital clocks—there were two of them, small silver screens, duct-taped to the dashboard—one flashing 9:00, the other reading 7:09. I looked out the window again. I guess I'd been asleep in the car for a while, because it was now very dark and had begun to snow and sleet heavily. I looked out the snowy windshield. It looked even worse from there—the road was caked with slushy snow and thin sheets of ice. The dim yellowish headlight beams struggled to shine through the foggy winter weather.

The car suddenly quivered and started sliding sideways. "Whoa!" Adam's coffee leapt suddenly out of the cup holder as he fumbled with the steering wheel, sending the car sliding backwards down the highway. Before I could say anything, the blinding glare of oncoming headlights appeared—there was a muffled *BEEEEEP!* as the engine screamed and the car slid sideways across the street, hitting the guardrail head-on. The hood cracked and the car dove over the guardrail, rolling upside-down and caving the roof in. I heard an airbag explode, and the car flipped twice down the hill before smashing sideways into a tree, and in a cloud of thick black smoke, I passed out.

* * *

"...Zellow. BUZZZ! Zellow. BUUUUZZZZZZZZ! Jack Zellow is absent. Attendance over. Remember that

Algebra classes have been cut until fee week. Have a good day." Click.

* * *

I woke up shivering, covered in the snow which was falling through the broken window. The two little clocks had both been flung out of the car. I slowly unlatched my seatbelt and unhinged the crumpled door. I stepped cautiously out into the dimly sunlit morning, my feet squelching in the thin, oily snow. I stepped back to look at the car.

Everything ahead of the front wheels was gone. The windshield had been crushed under the impact of the caved-in roof. The doors were positioned diagonally, hanging partly onto the snowy ground.

I suddenly came fully to my senses and bolted quickly to Adam's door. I grasped the broken handle and pulled with so much force that the door came clean off the car. Adam's head was resting on a deflated airbag.

"ADAM!" I shouted. I hit him, and luckily, he awakened with a start.

He looked silently up at the crushed roof of the Toyota.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

He looked slowly around him, clearing his vision and getting fully into awake-mode.

"Adam! Are you—"

"Yeah," he drawled, moving each of his limbs individually. "Well," he added with a flinch, "scratch that."

He jiggled his left leg.

"Do we—do we have anything, like... in the trunk or something?" I hadn't even thought to look before we left what he had brought. I looked at the trunk of the Toyota. It was completely crushed out of shape—and frozen, too.

I stepped into the empty doorframe of the car and came out with a tool that looked vaguely useful. I tried to open the trunk with it. I finally bent the lid enough to pry it off the car.

Adam is a lot smarter than he looks—not that he looks stupid or anything, but he's not the kind of kid you would really expect to pack three fully loaded bags with full sets of clothes, microfood caplets, laptops, wallets, flashlights, knives, compasses, firestarters, soap, duct tape, tool kit, mini microwave, juice powders, foodpacks, petrol powders, minidefibrillators, first aid kit with all the bells and whistles—and oh, of course, an aluminum fold-out splint.

I slid the splint out of the big gray first-aid box and heaved it out of the trunk. I presented it to Adam like a crown, grinning cautiously.

The car ran like a dying goat, but it was running.

It wasn't too hard to get it up the hill with Adam helping, even with his broken leg.

Adam tentatively stepped on the gas pedal. The car shuddered violently and settled into a dry rumble as it inched forward.

Within a week, we arrived at a small wooden cabin. Well, *arrived* is an awfully weak word, considering Adam permanently killed our only means of transportation getting there, and almost missed it completely in the first place. I didn't know where we were going to go from there (as Adam called it, *ad lib*). But we were there, anyway.

The cabin supposedly used to be owned by the government under some rule or regulation, but for whatever reason had been abandoned.

I doubted we were actually in Arizona, but I wasn't about to tell him that.

It was quite a scene, two kids living in an abandoned little cabin they had randomly found on the side of the road, graffiti littering the door, an old car with no wheels or engine parked neatly in front.

The inside of the "house" was dark wood, rough and untouched for many years, and full of big, rotten-looking knots. There was a small, dingy counter jutting out from the wall of the main room on which was set the microwave, juice powder, and foodpacks. I took a small wrinkly package from the table and studied it.

KRAFT FOODPAKS! INSTANT MICROWAVEABLE DINNERS IN 10 SECONDS!

I threw it in the minimicrowave. "Foodpack," said the automated microwave. A pause, then "Hamburger." Another pause. "Ten seconds." The microwave switched on silently.

"Want some food?" I shouted to Adam.

"No... I'll have some later..."

It was uncomfortably quiet in the cabin. There probably wasn't a living being for miles and miles.

I took the foodpack from the microwave and peeled the greasy, wet foil off the "burger". Upon tasting it, I realized why Adam hadn't wanted to eat.

It struck me that, despite my hunger, I should probably explore the house I'm going to be living in for—for who knows how long. I walked through the doorway at the back of the main room. There was a short hallway with the bathroom on one side, and a "bedroom" on the other.

The "bedroom" was outrageously small, definitely small enough to put quotes around, with just enough room to fit the two mattresses—firm, stiff, and creaky, but better than the ripped-up seat of a busted Toyota. A small fireplace lurked in the far corner of the room, dangerously close to the mattresses. Since there was nothing else to do, I went to bed, and heard Adam do the same shortly after.

I woke up to the sound of a gunshot.

I leapt up to see Adam standing in his army boots on his mattress with a silver revolver aimed at the ceiling.

"Adam, what are you doing?" I yelled.

"Shooting the bugs!" he replied absentmindedly.

I strained my tired eyes to the ceiling and saw what he meant.

A tiny, round black camera was swiveling about madly. I jumped again at the sound of another shot, this time blowing the camera into pieces. The room was now full of gunpowder.

"They've got cameras *everywhere*, Jack! Schools, houses, stores—even middle-of-nowhere cabins!" Adam exclaimed.

I stared at him sleepily, and then heaved myself off of the mattress, stepping around the pieces of black plastic from the camera.

I dragged myself tiredly into the main room, almost subconsciously looking about for cameras. I saw the box of foodpacks on the counter. I shuffled through them, and found one marked "Eggettes." I frowned suspiciously. There was a brown-and-white sketch of a fried egg on the front, so I assumed it could be breakfast. I was about to put it in the microwave, when Adam strolled in with a carton of *real* eggs!

"Adam! Where'd you get those?" I broke into a grin for the first time in days.

Adam didn't answer me as he walked over to the microwave. He cracked an egg into a small bowl, and gooey, golden egg yolk slid smoothly out of the cracked white eggshell.

I hadn't seen a genuine egg for years! They were rare in supermarkets, and of course the school never served them. I guess most of what I eat I judge by the school's food quality. Adam never eats, for whatever reason, so I guess he's not immune to the rubbery foodpacks most people eat now.

"Eggs," said the steely voice of the microwave, and whirred on.

"Adam, isn't--?" The screen door swung shut behind him. I shook my head and followed him outside. He was lying on the ground, watching the snowflakes flutter down on his face.

The house shimmered in the cold, blue winter wind. It was a desert, with just the one road and an old cabin. Everything was lightly dusted in snow. The silent wind patted my face with its icy mittens, the sun rested behind the big white clouds.

Adam suddenly leapt up and went into the house. I almost felt disappointed we couldn't have stayed outside longer. I went into the house behind him.

The microwave door had been thrown open by the egg yolk, which was now being eaten by whatever ghastly creatures we now had living in our walls.

I reopened the Eggettes nonchalantly and put the yellowish, flaky cube on a black plate to be microwaved. The microwave door was jammed open. I whacked the microwave, and whacked it again, and then threw the plate on the floor. The plate smashed into several pieces and the egg block stuck fast to the ground, jiggling around disgustingly.

"I may as well take a leaf from your book and forget it," I muttered to Adam.

"No, Jack, you better eat. You're gonna need it if we're gonna be living here forever."

"So why don't you ever eat?"

Adam walked into the bedroom.

I woke up in the middle of the night yet again to Adam sitting crosslegged, staring into a small yellow fire and mumbling to himself.

"A—Adam?" I started. "What are you—"

He got up very slowly, still looking into the fire, and mumbling faster and more loudly. Suddenly he whipped around, nearly knocking me off my feet in surprise. He was grinning an eerily genial grin that kind of scared me. "What? Oh—oh—nothing, nothing." He chuckled dryly and walked into the main room. I heard a door close, so I scrambled out of bed and followed him. The house was empty.

I stepped out of the house, being careful not to slip on the icy steps. I was following the sound of Adam's huge boots up the driveway and down the road in the middle of the night. The rain was smacking the asphalt street heavily, and there was not a sign of an automobile anywhere in sight.

I could faintly hear Adam muttering. "I need, I need..." he was talking smoothly and quietly, trailing off.

I cautiously followed Adam into the middle of the road, where I could dimly see the bright yellow median.

Time dragged by, slowing down and speeding up as I was so used to it doing. It could have been hours or minutes before we heard the familiar clicking noises of a hidden camera on the side of the road.

Adam heard it before I did, and he stopped suddenly, tensing up and looking frantically side to side.

Then I heard it again, and Adam suddenly darted off.

"Run Jack! Run!" I heard him screaming, bolting down the road. I don't know how he runs so fast, having broken his leg not two weeks ago, but he runs like hell.

"Wait!" I yelled into the darkness around me. I started running, and I looked around frantically to see why he was running.

A white cloud of spray seemed to rise from the rain behind me. I ran faster, only to see the beams of a pair of white headlights rearing over the hill, shining like a dagger through the rainy blackness. And there were red and blue lights too.

I could just hear Adam faintly shouting something... "They read it Jack! They read it all! You bastards! You bastards don't know who I am!"

I was dead scared. Where the hell had this whole mess suddenly come from? I ran as fast as I possibly could, and stumbled on a piece of wet rubber in the road. I scrambled up and, now being close enough

to see the blue Ford badge shining in the moonlight, dove headlong into the trees at the side of the road. The police car got closer, and for a few horrible seconds, I thought it was stopping. But sure enough, it hummed past, headlights swerving around in the distance.

I got up slowly, and upon seeing the taillights of the car disappear, started jogging down the road in the direction I thought Adam went. "Adam!" I halfheartedly called, to no response. I ran faster, hoping I was going the right direction. But after a few year-long minutes, I thought I saw the house. I ran as fast as I could, and after slipping again in the rain, stepped up to the house.

Assuming Adam had already gone in, I walked up to the screen door. Suddenly I heard something from in front of me, and then another noise from beside me. I whipped around anxiously, eyes darting around insanely, to see a brand-new big white camera revolving on the roof. It stopped its glassy, lifeless gaze on my face. Within seconds there was a click, a beep, and a whir of sirens.

I launched myself into the house.

Suddenly I didn't know what was happening. The world stretched and distorted before my eyes, everything was black and white and red, everything was going dark as I stared in terror at Adam's dead body on the ground, his face covered in dirty scarlet blood. Everything else in the world lost its certainty. I stumbled backwards into something... I fell to the ground, smashing the back of my head and dislodging my jaw. My eyes moved to the rusty revolver lying next to Adam. The world swam above me.

I remember climbing into a police car filled with scratchy conversation from within a phone, hearing phrases like "anorexic" and "pyromaniac", bleeding profusely into something scratchy wrapped sloppily around my head, and holding my breath, looking blurrily back at the camera behind me.

* * *

I was drowning in the deep end of reality.

I stepped on the gas and crashed into a tree because I wanted to be different.

- Lucas Henry