

# Astronaut Food

Number Two



**NEW!**

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CHOCOLATE / CARAMEL / PEANUT BUTTER

The advertisement features a stylized illustration of a rocket ship in space, with a white planet or moon in the background. The rocket is blue and silver, with red flames at the bottom. The text is arranged in a clean, modern layout with a mix of bold, sans-serif fonts and a script font for the brand name.

“I, Myself, Have Masked my Identity Three to Four Times” originally appeared in

*Kraken Lore*

“Six o’clock Somewhere” originally appeared in *The Scriber’s Nook*

“Failed Trying Not to do the Same” originally appeared in *The Fiction Writer’s Den*

My gratitude to the editors of those publications for their helpful recommendations

# I, Myself, Have Masked my Identity Three to Four Times

The *Rolling Stone* donor has deteriorated.

Every month, he leaves two copies of *Rolling Stone* in the lobby on the bench by the mailboxes. He removes the subscription labels before putting them down.

Two copies with their subscription labels removed. Every month.

It was an orderly enterprise in its time. Though he removed the label, the remainder of the magazine would be as crisp as if you had bought it at the newsstand. The lines where the panel had been removed were at nearly perfect right angles.

Really, the labels had been removed with surgical precision. Doubtless he used scissors, a ruler, perhaps even an exacto blade or box cutter.

I had deep respect for the work he did. Such care could only be the result of precise, polished faculties. With lines cut like that, with the copies organized in a neat stack in the same convenient, predictable place, you could be sure you were in the hands of a secure and stable mind.

The removal of the labels was the work of a meticulous intelligence that showed signs of brilliance. It was a beacon of lucidity to those of us in the apartment. It was a beacon of lucidity to us all.

Now, I concede that it did kind of ruin the cover. It was true, it *ruined* the cover, which looked less attractive with the subscription panel missing. It was true—what can I say? It was. It *was* true. *True*. But, I didn't hold a grudge. He had a right to hide his identity. I, myself, have masked my identity three to four times.

Besides, he had done such a beautiful job of trimming the subscription labels that it was hard not to appreciate his craftsmanship.

I admit, I *do* admit that I hungered to know the man's identity. He was a craftsman, and in today's society, craftsmen are on the decline.

Once, before the decline, I boldly approached a man I believed to be the *Rolling Stone* donor.

I expressed myself in the clear way that the *Rolling Stone* donor might appreciate: "Are you the *Rolling Stone* donor?" I asked. I knew a craftsman of that caliber would appreciate a sentence of such fine work.

*Are you the Rolling Stone donor?* A formulation that is itself a model of precision and elegance.

I wanted to send the message that I was the type of man who could appreciate the work he did with subscription labels: a like-minded amateur craftsmen, even. In fact, I had come to the point that I was considering purchasing my own dual subscription to a magazine to join him in removing the subscription labels each month (dare it be *Rolling Stone*? I wouldn't want him to feel I was encroaching on his quarters). I would be the second to join his movement, and perhaps many would follow. I imagined

craftsmen across the country removing the subscription panels of their magazines monthly. It was a movement that could sweep the nation. It *ought* to sweep the nation.

As I approached, the man's eyebrows stood out to me. They looked like mustaches.

"No," he said in response to my fine verbal handiwork. He seemed to float, bobbing left and right.

"Do you know who does donate the *Rolling Stone* magazines?"

"I don't read it," he said, wavering as he hovered above the ground.

Two copies of the December issue were out on the bench. I walked over and held them up for him. "You didn't see who left these here?"

"I didn't read it."

"Very well, but pardon me: has anyone ever told you that you look like you should have noses on your forehead?" I asked.

His answer was to float off petulantly, doubtless to spend the rest of his afternoon circulating around the lobby. His arms had a peculiar, loose quality, and he swayed as though a mild wind blew him this way and that, much like a balloon.

I sensed something menacing about the balloon with mustaches for eyebrows.

Suddenly frightened, I took the *Rolling Stone* copies upstairs with me. I waited until I got inside to inspect them. I brought them to where I had torn an exceedingly small hole in the plastic that I'd put over the window. After all, an apartment needs natural light. The rest of the window was covered with plastic bags I'd gotten from

the liquor store where I buy my Schnapps. There was only one window.

It was then that the depth of the change sunk in. Prior to that, I had noticed the corners of where the subscription panel had been removed starting to look a little frayed. At the time, I'd excused it: the old boy had gotten a little sloppy. We all have our off days.

But this, this was something else. The space missing was still the size of a subscription panel, but the edges were ragged as though he had torn the label off with his hands. *His hands*. His hands, mind you. The panel's uneven edge bespoke mental decline. It was a rebuke to the austere beauty we had come to depend on.

That ragged edge was a murder.

From there, things deteriorated rapidly. They say it goes that way: slow at first and then all at once. The *Rolling Stone* donor became a barbarian. A lunatic. By the February issue, he was tearing off the entire bottom third of the page. By June, the cover was mangled like a dog had taken it into its jaws and thrust it this way and that.

I sensed the fall ahead of us. I began to collect the evidence. I would store each magazine in its own brown envelope. My increase in precision would be inversely correlated with the donor's decline—not that I was ever so shabby in such an area to begin with. On the front, I would write a description of the condition the magazine had been in when I found it, the date and time, the angle of the issue relative to the other of that month in the pile (there of course always being two copies—things might be declining, but we weren't scumbags), its place relative to the bench's edge, I, Myself, Have Masked my Identity Three to Four Times

the approximate temperature in the room at the time of me finding it, the color of the hair of the person on the cover, and what I personally happened to have had for breakfast that morning (dinner rolls, of course).

I called this collection Dossier X. I was prepared at all times to submit Dossier X to anyone who was interested. Perhaps on a conscious level no one had been interested, but I suspect that on a subconscious level everyone had a yearning for Dossier X.

It was the April issue that spelled the end.

I saw the guy with mustaches for eyebrows before I saw the magazine. He was in the back of the lobby, floating from wall to wall. From what I could tell, he had been making his way around the perimeter of the room when I walked up. He was close to its edge when he turned to me. I didn't bother to reintroduce myself because his face showed a gleeful familiarity.

I looked to the bench. They were there.

"Cover's off," I said, nodding towards the bench. Only a thin line near the spine of the magazine remained of what had been the cover.

He smiled. In the darkness of the lobby, his face had taken on a red glow.

"The cover is off," I said.

His smile widened.

"*The cover is off*," I screeched.

"I'm sorry to say that I didn't read it," he said.

# Six o'clock Somewhere

The choice to ignore the phone was easy, but the self-control to tolerate the ringing was hard. The hotel's old phone didn't have a switch to shut off the ringer. He'd checked. Still, the fact that it was the hotel phone and not his cell phone gave him hope. He looked from the phone to the digital clock next to it. Frustratingly, 6 p.m. was too early to go to bed.

The phone stopped. It felt good when it stopped.

The day had echoed for him at its end, shaking his head so much that it soon shook his body as well, and he had lain in the hotel bed twitching since getting home from the event center. Each contortion felt like he was throwing out a little piece of the garbage that the day had filled him with. It provided the relief of licking chapped lips.

After some time, he got up and walked over to the coffeemaker by the bathroom. At first, he forgot to put water in, and the machine hissed when he added it. He stood in front of the clunky machine as it brewed, watching it steam. When it was done, he emptied the carafe into one of the hotel's Styrofoam cups and took it back to the bed.

As he sat down, the phone rang again. With a sigh, he answered it.

“Hello,” he said, holding the thick receiver with his shoulder and the coffee in his other hand.

“Marshall, where have you been?”

“Marissa? Why are you calling me in the room?”

“Because you haven’t been answering your phone.”

“I’ve been at the convention. I’ve made some contacts that will work out *very well* for us,” he said.

“There are things that matter besides the convention, yes?” College had given her that annoying way of making comments that sounded like questions.

“There’s a lot that matters besides the convention, but eating and paying bills isn’t so bad either, *yes?*” he said.

She ignored it. “Jake had to come home from school today.”

“Why wasn’t he in school?”

“The bus passed a tractor-trailer truck on the way there. They couldn’t calm him down, so they sent him home.”

“Jake had to go home from school because he saw a truck,” he confirmed flatly.

“You know it’s more than that.”

It was more than that.

“Today was one of the dark ones. He needed you,” she said.

“There’s a lot of trucks in the world. He’s going to need to learn how to be around them.”

“He needed you today,” she pleaded.

“I’m not his father.” He paused before adding, “I’m here now.”

“Ever heard of checking your messages? One phone call from you during lunch could have saved the day.”

He gritted his teeth. “I was at the convention during lunch. Listen, I know what he means to you, but he’s going to need to be able to do everyday shit without having to talk to someone about it.”

“He’s put up with enough shit—enough of your shit,” she said.

“*People drive trucks,*” he shouted.

She sighed. “We both know that the core of the situation is not the truck, it is—“

He interrupted her with his shouting. “Everything was *fine* before you started in. Just like always, everything was *fine* until you started in with your bullshit.”

“You’re a real asshole, Marshall.” She hung up.

He put the receiver down and took a sip of coffee that was violent by its end. Finishing the coffee in one gulp, he tossed the empty cup toward the trashcan. It landed on the floor. Ignoring it, he got up to take a shower. Maybe 6 p.m. wasn’t so early after all.

“It’s six o’clock somewhere,” he said to himself.

# Failed Trying Not to Do the Same

Seeing Chris Williams made Mike think of gas station sunglasses and the first time he'd felt like white trash. Now Chris was angled toward the bar door with his back to a window that overlooked the Pequonsett river, talking with people from their class. As with the shops on Main Street, and seemingly now their classmates, the bar at Harbor Park had grown with the town from blue collar to respectably middle class.

The last time he'd seen Chris had been awhile back, a few years into college, when he was still taking night classes at Burlington University in an attempt to get his GPA up high enough to apply to a four-year program. He'd tried to throw a party, but Chris had been the only one to stop by, which meant that he'd awkwardly watched Mike and his then-girlfriend from Brattleboro, a girl with uneven, ropey dreads and a bad cough, eat microwaved burritos while drinking gin and tonics from oversized, warped plastic tumblers. Chris had turned down his offer of a drink.

He might have laid it on a little thick that night. This hit him when Chris's face registered scorn when Mike proclaimed that if he did as well on his SAT retake as he had on his practice tests, he'd go to Wesleyan. Later it had been even more

humiliating when he hadn't even made it into Burlington's full-time program, but there was no reason to think Chris knew about that.

In hindsight, Mike could see that Chris had been one of those peculiar pseudo-nerds who had the form of a nerd but lacked the academic performance of one, which Mike guessed made Chris a regular kid. He always wanted to ask people like that: why have you accomplished so little when you had none of the distractions of drugs or sex?

Chris looked the same but worse, with the same bulging eyes, protruding ears, and high forehead. He had the same unkind default facial expression now as when they were kids. Always on the tall side, he was standing in a group with people Mike didn't recognize. He did, however, recognize two guys standing next to Chris's group: Dan Rohrer and Paul Gilbert stood side by side scanning the crowd.

Dan noticed him, smiled, and nodded his chin upward toward him. Mike lowered his head and walked in their direction before stopping abruptly and holding up a finger. One minute. He should get a drink first. Dan nodded.

The floor was crowded with faces that seemed vaguely familiar. He dodged the groups, trying to keep his face flat. The song changed and he recognized a hit from the early '00s: "Hot in Here." He sensed a DJ somewhere near the far wall but couldn't see through the crowd.

He still drank, kind of a lot, but he chose water over beer at the bar before circling back to the group. As he approached, Dan and Paul seemed to be enjoying a

companionable silence. He didn't know about Paul, but he knew Dan was an actuary. Mike didn't have a LinkedIn account, but the website allowed you to look at two profiles without one. Dan's LinkedIn profile had the "500+" icon, which meant he had at least 500 connections on there.

Despite already knowing, after walking up, Mike turned to Dan and said, "So, what do you do?"

"I'm an actuary," Dan said. "After school, I started as a mailman, but then I realized I could make more by sitting on my ass," Dan leaned in like he was telling Mike a secret before leaning back to laugh loudly.

"So, what are you up to? Living around here?" Paul asked him.

"Actually, I go to school in Boston," Mike said.

Dan looked a little surprised. Mike was insulted but couldn't hold it against him. It had taken him an extra year to graduate high school, so technically this wasn't even his class anymore. It was the one he'd started with. It had taken him a long time to realize that having to repeat a year of high school didn't mean "bold free thinker" to most people; it meant fuck-up.

"Yeah? Good for you," Dan said. "What are you taking up?"

Mike put his hand to his eyes. "I do multidisciplinary scholarship in astrophysics, medicinal herbs, and metaphysics," he said.

"Oh, all right," Dan said, looking confused. In eighth grade his dirty yearbook inscriptions had been all the rage.

“Metaphysics, like philosophy?” Paul said.

“Metaphysics is philosophy, but not all philosophy is metaphysics,” Mike said, repeating something he thought he remembered his professor saying on the first day of class.

“But is *all* metaphysics philosophy?” Dan said and laughed.

Mike had the impression Dan had said gibberish, but he couldn’t quite work out why. Unsure, he settled on saying, “Only in its essence.”

“I took a philosophy class in college, ‘Ethics for Engineers,’” Paul said.

“Oh, how was it?” Mike asked.

“It was all right. We talked about the different philosophers and what they thought.”

Mike put a look on his face intended to communicate sympathy. “Those classes are not always well taught.”

“Yeah, I guess it was taught all right. I mean, I probably could have worked harder, too.”

“I see,” Mike said sternly.

“I didn’t care about it, but we had some good classes,” Paul said. “A lot of our professors had gone to places like MIT.”

“Yes, I’m sure. As for myself, I have set in place the same rigorous procedures as everyone in the university setting. Besides, philosophy is only one, very small, part of what I do. As I mentioned, I study physics and botany as well,” Mike said.

Paul looked at him with a serious, unblinking expression. “I think I’ll take a trip to the little boy’s room,” he said. The other two got quiet as they watched him go.

Dan took a sip from his Blue Moon. “Sounds cool, Mike, so this is for like an associate’s, bachelor’s...”

“Oh, I’m done with all of that. I’m getting a master’s degree.”

Dan looked surprised again. “Oh, hey, all right. In Boston, you said?”

“Yes, in Boston—well, outside of Boston.”

Dan nodded. “All right, well, it sounds like you’re really doing well for yourself. Hey, one of the guys I work with went to school in Boston at Suffolk. He had like a triple freaking major, or something. Sounds kind of like you. I guess that’s how you guys do it out there.”

“Lots of people at the undergraduate level do.”

“But you’re doing it at the graduate level,” Dan said, leaning in conspiratorially. He seemed excited.

“In a manner of speaking,” Mike said.

Dan took another sip from his beer and looked thoughtful. “What’s your degree going to be in, with you studying all those things? Will you have like one master’s degree, but in physics, metaphysics, and...what was the other thing you said?”

“Botany. Actually, they call it ‘Advanced Liberal Studies.’”

“Liberal studies,” Dan said, mulling it over. “Ok,” he said, starting to nod his head. “All right, so a master of arts in liberal studies. Not bad, buddy.” He went to take a sip from his Blue Moon, realized it was empty, shook the bottle, and smiled at Mike.

Before he knew what he was doing, Mike blurted out: “Yes, well, it will be a master of extension studies in the liberal arts.”

“Extension studies? Huh, why do they call it that?” he asked.

“It’s a program for people who are going to school while working, you know, who aren’t just doing the *traditional* thing,” Mike said, his voice quickening. “We have a lot of the same professors as the people at the main campus—the same as the undergrads get,” he said, sounding like he was interrupting himself.

“And some of your professors just teach grad students?”

“Yes, grad students.” He waited a beat. “Or students doing the undergrad program in extension studies.”

“Oh, they have an undergrad degree in it, too?” Dan said. Mike made a noise of rushed acknowledgement. “Undergrad program,” Dan repeated. “So, is that as competitive as the undergrad thing at the main...uhm, not in extension studies?” Dan asked.

Mike bit down in a way that he imagined made the sides of his mouth bulge. Things seemed to slow down around him. “Well, it would depend on the student,” he said.

“Oh, I’m sure,” Dan said, shaking and not nodding his head.

“Hey, given that you’ve finished that fine libation you’ve been imbibing, why don’t I get us another glass,” Mike said.

Dan blinked. “Another beer? Oh, sure, thanks.”

With a bow, Mike turned and walked toward the bar. The floor was crowded. He cut an unobtrusive path through it, ducking low and stepping high. He fought the urge to go back to his place in Sommerville. He could go back and re-read the comments his professors had used the track changes feature of Word to write on his essays. The classes might not be the same, but a lot of the professors really were the same ones who taught in the ultra-competitive programs on the main campus. And those people, the ones who taught the very best, were the same who wrote things like “Good” and “Yes” in the margins of his papers. The name on their Word comments wasn’t “Professor So-and-So,” but rather the university’s name because they used software registered to that grand place.

He glanced at Chris as he retreated and again remembered the sunglasses. It might have been a birthday party. Knowing he’d see everyone, he’d dressed for the occasion: jean shorts, an anarchy t-shirt he’d ordered from a heavy metal catalogue, and sunglasses with peace signs that he’d gotten from a gas station. The peace signs were stamped on the sunglasses’ circular, purple lenses.

He’d kept them in his pocket on his way through the neighborhood, taking them out shortly after he’d gotten to the group. As soon as he put them on, one of

the little loud mouths from the neighborhood, a bratty girl with red hair, asked him why he had peace signs on his glasses. “Because I support peace,” he’d said. Chris had called him out on his anarchy t-shirt, the messages seeming inconsistent: how could you support peace when your shirt says you want chaos? The group had laughed.

He’d tried to laugh it off. It wasn’t the purported inconsistency that bothered him. Even then he’d had the vague idea that “green anarchism” had something to do with equality. It was more that he was suddenly aware of himself as a walking billboard of slogans printed on cheap gas station crap. It hit him that he looked ridiculous and was probably white trash.

“A room of one’s own,” he said to himself as he returned to the refreshments table, feeling a little decadent for thinking it. After all, he’d smoked and drank himself into being a laughingstock, squandering his privilege rather than being denied it from the start. He’d thwarted his own confused attempts to find depth in the world.

But another part of him felt coiled up rage. All of that was so far behind him. He looked around the people at the reunion. These had been his classmates. His neighbors. They were people who contented themselves with different flavors of mediocrity. The world had a long memory for the failures of people who tried not to do the same, he thought to himself.



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editor. Learn more at  
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