

Star Backwards

In the first years of the Second Millennium, CE...

1) Our hero waits in his van beneath a pair of giant golden arches and behind a Ford 1-50 full of surfboards and sand. There is a mess of stickers on the back of the truck but only two catch his eye. One reads: “livegrowfuckmultiplyspoilhurtperishrot” and makes perfect sense but seems far less important than the other, which says “End Dolphin Castration Now” and confuses him. This confusion might have something to do with a show he watched recently on Animal Planet during which a semi-British sounding narrator claimed dolphins are the smartest animals on earth while a piece of footage rolled over and over again showing this family of wet, grinning dolphins as they resurface next to a U.S. Navy gunboat after having supposedly located and diffused an underwater land mine. But it might not have anything to do with anything. Mathias is deliriously tired.

In the last few minutes he’s been sifting through a lapful of change, eyeing the two bumper stickers, and feeling like a creature from space. He’s also been having an unrelated idea: why not turn each and every McDonald’s into a great big vending machine?

Eliminate human error, he thinks.

Then he changes his mind. He’s willing to admit that burger joints might need to hire cooks or managers, but there’s definitely no need for human cashiers or drive-thru attendants. He has the vague realization: this is a billion dollar idea, one that could only be the product of genius. Thus preoccupied, he has no clue how much change he has counted out when he’s distracted by the sound of a horn blowing behind him and he pulls up to the window completely unprepared.

The flat-faced Mexican girl in the window is talking to herself, Mathias thinks, or actually talking into a small microphone attached to her headset, so she doesn't notice him at first. She slips her open palm out the drive-thru window without looking. He just hands her all his money without bothering to count; much more than whatever I owe, he thinks, two handfuls. When the cashier looks up to see who is paying all in change, she recognizes him immediately and claps her hands to her cheeks. She says something fast in Spanish and two co-workers appear behind her, a black girl with braids and another Hispanic girl wearing thick plastic glasses, both visibly excited, maybe expecting someone more impressive.

They get our hero, but they're satisfied; they've seen a face from the screen. All three girls try to say things at once and it comes out sounding like a storm of bats. Mathias flashes a smile, like he is embarrassed to meet *them*, like *they* are famous, and slides his sunglasses back up his nose. The two girls in back continue shrieking while the original drive-thru attendant hands his lunch through the window, trying to concentrate. He smiles big one time and takes off, flicking a wave of the wrist but not waiting around for his change.

He had stopped at McDonald's hungry for grease, feeling depleted and woozy but oh so comfortable after leaving a hospital off Coldwater Canyon Drive in Sherman Oaks where he relieved himself of this week's plasma donation, and before that from a meeting with his producers regarding the show's imminent hiatus.

Now he's cruising on Mulholland en route to his casa in the hills, stuffing a Quarter Pounder into his face, sucking on a shake afterwards, lighting a cigarette. All the while thinking of fast food robots. Couldn't my extra value meal just come down a little chute to my car? Why pay people to take orders?

“End all human contact at the drive-thru!” Mathias shouts as if in protest, bits of food falling into his lap.

He begins scrolling through the thousands of tunes on his mp3 player with a tiny wafer thin remote that also controls the DVD players and flat screens installed in the back of the headrests.

“Personally, I believe this van to be the hottest of all my whips,” Mathias practices. “It’s my personal fav, my # 1 ride,” trying to decide exactly how to express himself in an original and entertaining way this afternoon when he guides an MTV camera crew through his house for a *Cribs* shoot.

The *Cribs* segment is scheduled to air sometime in the near future while his show is on hiatus. It’s supposed to be sandwiched between a tour of Britney Spear’s little sister’s lake house and Carmello Anthony’s palace in Denver, or possibly between a segment about Stephen Baldwin’s cottage in Malibu and a houseboat with a bowling alley owned by a spikey-haired dirt bike jumper. According to Mathias’ agent and the producers, the *Cribs* spot is one of many things in progress that will keep the show “out there”, which also means keep Mathias Canopy out there, “in the people’s homes,” while he gets a much needed vacation.

His phone vibrates on the seat next to him and without looking he reaches over to click it off and drops it back onto the upholstery where it lands with a comforting, leathery thud. Recently it seems like every time he thinks his phone is turned off, it’s on again. It rings all the time, like it has a mind of its own. My phone is more practical than I am, he often thinks, with more uses: it functions as a camera, a calculator, a PDA with internet access, it sends text messages, e-mails, and it can record up to two hours of streaming audio or video. Right now it plays Stevie Wonders’ “Superstition” whenever it rings. Sometimes when Mathias watches the glowing digital screen dim and then turn off he feels like he’s in control of his life, but the feeling never lasts.

The plasma donation this morning was an adequate release, he tells himself, but I might still try to donate some blood later at Cedar Sinai if I can, already beginning to itch a little around the nose and ears. Also thinking: *Do I have a fever?* He takes a generic Valium from a bottle in the custom mid-console he had installed when the interior of the Astrovan was redone in charcoal leather and khaki suede. He hangs his head sideways out the window and sucks the stale breeze through his nostrils, his mouth hung open like a dog's, thirsty and wishing he'd gotten a Coke instead of this plastic strawberry milkshake.

Just like regular people Mathias is only allowed to donate plasma four times a month. Once a week is the hospital's policy, which is there "for your health" as he's been told by both his physician and the psychiatrist he sat down with twice last year but who now exists solely as a prescription artist, catering mainly to Mathias' Attention Deficit Disorder, off and on insomnia, and the general anxiety that is thought to be the cause of his Irritable Bowel Syndrome. For his plasma, Mathias receives fifty dollars a visit, two-hundred dollars a month, but of course that's not why he does it. Mathias often tells himself that he can't *help* helping people. He firmly believes that celebrity should have a cause, or at least that's what he's been told and it has seemed to make a lot of sense to him lately. Donating vital fluids is super noble, he often tells himself, and particularly unselfish.

But he also sells his sperm pretty regularly and he's been checking the asking price for his autograph on E-Bay more and more in the last few months. Currently, on a glossy *Sell Your Soul* promo: \$43