



Waste Not, Want
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Transcriber's Note:

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PANIC roused him—the black imp of panic that lived under the garish rug of this unfamiliar room and crawled out at dawn to nudge him awake and stare from the blank space to his left where Tillie's gray head should have been.

His fists clenched in anger—at himself. He'd never been the sort to make allowance for his own weakness and didn't propose to begin doing so now, at age eighty-six. Tillie'd been killed in that crash well over a year ago and it was time he got used to his widowerhood and quit searching for her every morning.

But even after he gave himself the bawling out, orientation came slowly. The surroundings looked so strange. No matter what he told himself it was hard to believe that he was indeed Fred Lubway, mechanical engineer, and had a right to be in this single bed, alone in this house his Tillie had never seen.

The right to be there was all wrong. He disliked the house and hated all its furnishings.

The cybernetic cooker in the kitchen; the magnetically-suspended divans in the living room; the three-dimensional color broadcasts he could so readily project to any wall or ceiling; the solartropic machinery that would turn any face of the pentagonal house into the sun or the shade or the breeze; the lift that would raise the entire building a hundred feet into the air to give him a wider view and more privacy—all left him dissatisfied.

They were new. None had been shared with Tillie. He used them only to the extent required by law to fulfill his duty as a consumer.

"You must change your home because of the change in your family composition," the Ration Board's bright young female had explained, right after Tillie's funeral. "Your present furnishings are obsolete. You must replace them."

"And if I don't?" He'd been truculent.

"I doubt we'd have to invoke the penalties for criminal underconsumption," she'd explained airily. "There are plenty of other possible courses of action. Maybe we'd just get a decision that you're prematurely senile and unable to care for yourself. Then you'd go to a home for the aged where they'd *help* you consume—with forced feedings and such."

So here he was, in this home-of-his-own that seemed to belong to someone else. Well, at least he wasn't senile, even if he did move a little slowly, now, getting out of bed. He'd warm up soon. All by himself. With no one's help.

And as far as these newfangled gadgets in the bathroom were concerned, he could follow any well-written set of directions. He'd scalded himself that time only because the printed instructions were so confusing.

He took a cold shower this time.

When the airtowel had finished blowing and he was half dry—not wholly dry because the machine wasn't adapted to people who took ice-cold showers—he went in to the clothing machine. He punched the same few holes in its tape that he put there every day, stood in the right place, and in due course emerged with his long, rawboned frame covered by magenta tights having an excessively baggy seat.

He knew the costume was neither pretty nor fashionable and that its design, having been wholly within his control when he punched the tape, revealed both his taste and his mood. He didn't care; there was no one in the world whom he wanted to impress.

He looked in the dressing room mirror not to inspect the tights but to examine his face and see if it needed shaving. Too late he remembered that twenty years had elapsed since the permanent depilatories were first invented and ten since he'd used one and stopped having to shave.

There were too many changes like that in this gadget-mad world; too many new ways of doing old things. Life had no stability.

He stalked into the kitchen wishing he could skip breakfast—anger always unsettled his stomach. But everyone was required to eat at least three meals a day. The vast machine-records system that kept track of each person's consumption would reveal to the Ration Board any failure to use his share of food, so he dialed Breakfast Number Three—tomato juice, toast, and coffee.

The signal-panel flashed "Under-Eating" and he knew the state machine-records system had advised his cybernetic cooker to increase the amount of his consumption. Chin in hands, he sat hopelessly at the kitchen table awaiting his meal, and in due course was served prunes, waffles, bacon, eggs, toast, and tea—none of which he liked, except for toast.

He ate dutifully nevertheless, telling himself he wasn't afraid of the ration-cops who were always suspecting him of underconsumption because he was the tall skinny type and never got fat like most people, but that he ate what the cooker had given him because his father had been unemployed for a long time during the depression seventy-five years before, so he'd never been able to bring himself to throw food away.

Failure to consume had in the old days been called "overproduction" and by any name it was bad. So was war—he'd read enough about war to be glad that form of consumption had finally been abolished.

Still it was a duty and not a pleasure to eat so much, and a relief to get up and put the dirty dishes into the disposal machine and go up topside to his gyro.

DISGUSTINGLY, he had a long wait before departure. After climbing into the gyro and transmitting his flight plan, he had to sit seething for all of fifteen minutes before the Mount Diablo Flight Control Center deigned to lift his remote-controlled gyro into the air. And when the signal came, ascent was so awkwardly abrupt it made his ears pop.

He couldn't even complain. The Center was mechanical, and unequipped to hear complaints.

It routed him straight down the San Joaquin Valley—a beautiful sight from fifteen thousand feet, but over-familiar. He fell asleep and awakened only when unexpectedly brought down at Bakersfield Field.

Above his instrument panel the printing-receiver said "Routine Check of Equipment and Documents. Not Over Five Minutes' Delay."

But it could take longer. And tardiness was subject to official punishments as a form of unproductiveness. He called George Harding at the plant.

Harding apparently had been expecting the call. His round bluff face wore a scowl of annoyance.

"Don't you ever watch the newscasts?" he demanded angrily. "They began this 'Routine Check' you're in at five this morning, and were broadcasting pictures of the resulting traffic jam by six. If you'd filed a flight plan for Santa Barbara and come on down the coast you'd have avoided all this."

"I'm not required to listen to newscasts," Fred replied tartly. "I own the requisite number of receivers and—"

"Now, listen, Fred," Harding interrupted. "We need you down here so hurry up!"

Fred heard him switch off and sat for a moment trembling with rage. But he ended by grinning wryly. Everyone was in the same boat, of course. For the most part, people avoided thinking about it. But he could now see himself as if from above, spending his life flitting back and forth between home and plant, plant and home; wracking his brain to devise labor-saving machines while at the plant, then rushing home to struggle with the need to consume their tremendous output.

Was he a man? Or was he a caged squirrel racing in an exercise-wheel, running himself ragged and with great effort producing absolutely nothing?

He wasn't going to do it any longer, by golly! He was going to—

"Good morning!" A chubby young man in the pea-green uniform of a ration-cop opened the door and climbed uninvited into the cockpit. "May I check the up-to-dateness of your ship's equipment, please?"

Fred didn't answer. He didn't have to. The young officer was already in the manual pilot's seat, checking the secondary controls.

In swift routine he tried motor and instruments, and took the craft briefly aloft. Down again, he demanded Fred's papers.

The licenses that pertained to the gyro were in order, but there was trouble over Fred's personal documents: his ration-book contained far too few sales-validations.

"You're not doing your share of consuming, Oldtimer," the young cop said mildly. "Look at all these unused food allotments! Want to cause a depression?"

"No."

"Man, if you don't eat more than this, we'll have mass starvation!"

"I know the slogans."

"Yes, but do you know the penalties? Forced feeding, compulsory consumption—do you think they're fun?"

"No."

"Well, you can file your flight plan and go, but if you don't spend those tickets before their expiration dates, Mister, you'll have cause to regret it."

With a special pencil, he sense-marked the card's margins.

Fred felt that each stroke of the pencil was a black mark against him. He watched in apprehensive silence.

The young cop was also silent. When finished he wordlessly returned the identification, tipped his cap, and swaggered off, his thick neck red above his green collar.

Fred found he'd had more than enough of swaggering young men with beefy red necks. That added to his disgust with the constant struggle to produce and consume, consume and produce. Vague, wishful threats froze as determination: he absolutely wasn't going through any more of it.

He filed a flight plan that would return him to his home, and in due course arrived there.

The phone rang in his ears as he opened the cockpit. He didn't want to answer, and he stayed on the roof securing the gyro and plugging in its battery-charger. But he couldn't ignore the bell's insistent clamor.

When he went downstairs and switched on the phone, George Harding's round face splashed on the wall.

"Fred," he said, "when we talked a few hours ago, you forgot to say you were sick. I phoned to confirm that for the Attendance Report. Did this call get you out of bed?"

He could see it hadn't. Therefore Fred knew he must be recording the audio only, and not the video; trying to give him a break with the Attendance people and coach him on the most appeasing answers.

A well-meant gesture, but a false one. And Fred was fed up with the false. "I forgot nothing," he said bluntly. "I'm perfectly well and haven't been near bed."

"Now, wait," George said hastily. "It's no crime to be sick. And—ah—don't say anything you wouldn't want preserved for posterity."

"George, I'm not going to play along with you," Fred insisted. "This business of producing to consume and consuming to produce has got me down. It's beyond all reason!"

"No, it isn't. You're an excellent mechanical engineer, Fred, but you're not an economist. That's why you don't understand. Just excuse me for a minute, and I'll show you."

He left the field of view. Fred waited incuriously for him to return, suddenly conscious of the fact that he now had nothing better to do with his time.

George was back in less than a minute, anyhow. "O.K.," he said briskly. "Now, where were we? Oh, yes. I just wanted to say that production is a form of consumption, too—even the production of machine-tools and labor-saving devices. So there's nothing inconsistent—"

"What are you trying to do?" Fred demanded. "Don't lecture me—I know as much econ as you do!"

"But you've got to come back to work, Fred! I want you to use your rations, put your shoulder to the wheel, and conform generally. The policing's too strict for you to try anything else, fella—and I like you too well to want to see you—"

"I don't need you to protect me, George," Fred said stiffly. "I guess you mean well enough. But goodbye." He switched off.

THE SILENCE struck him. Not a sound stirred the air in that lonely new house except the slight wheeze of his breathing.

He felt tired. Bone weary. As if all the fatigues of his eighty-six years were accumulated within him.

He stood by a window and stared blindly out. Everyone seemed to have been heckling him, shoving him around, making him change all his ways every minute. He didn't want to change. He didn't want to be forever adapting to new gadgets, new fads, new ways of doing things.

He thought of the villages of India, substantially unchanged for three, four, five thousand years. The villagers had no money, so they couldn't be consumers. Maybe they had the natural way to live. Statically. Also, frugally.

But no. It was too frugal, too static. He'd heard and read too much about the starvation, pestilence, peonage and other ills plaguing those Indian villagers. They didn't have life licked, either.

The Indians had not enough, the Americans, too much. One was as bad as the other.

And he was in the middle.

He left the window he'd been staring from unseeingly and walked to the foyer control-panel. There he pushed the button that would cause the house to rear a hundred feet into the air on its titanium-aluminum plunger.

Then he went back to the window to watch the ground recede. He felt a hand on his shoulder. He decided the sensation was an illusion—a part of his state of mind.

A young man's voice said, "Mr. Lubway, we need you."

That was a nice thing to hear, so Fred turned, ready to smile. He didn't smile. He was confronted by another ration-cop.

This one was a tall young man, dark and hefty. He seemed very kindly, in his official sort of way.

"Mr. George Harding sent me," he explained. "He asked us to look you up and see if we could help."

"Yes?"

"You seem to have been a little unhappy this morning. I mean—well—staring out that window while your house rises dangerously high. Mr. George Harding didn't like the mood you're in, and neither do I, Mr. Lubway. I'm afraid you'll have to come to the hospital. We can't have a valuable citizen like you falling out that window, can we?"

"What do you mean, 'valuable citizen'? I'm no use to anybody. There's plenty of engineers, and more being graduated every semester. You don't need me."

"Oh, yes, we do!" Shaking his head, the young ration-cop took a firm grip on Fred's right biceps. "You've got to come along with me till your outlook changes, Mr. Lubway."

"Now, see here!" Fred objected, trying unsuccessfully to twist free of the officer's grip. "You've no call to treat me like a criminal. Nor to talk to me as if I were senile. My outlook won't change, and you know it!"

"Oh, yes, it will! And since you're neither criminal nor senile, that's what has to be done."

"We'll do it in the most humane way possible. A little brain surgery, and you'll sit in your cage and consume and consume and consume without a care in the world. Yes, sir, we'll change your outlook!"

"Now, you mustn't try to twist away from me like that, Mr. Lubway. I can't let you go. We need every consumer we can get."

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Nathaniel Hawthorne

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