

Timed release

Clean thoughts.

David Marusek

Neil is having a slow day at the office when Macie tweets him:

@NorthernGlory Booked Delta 289 tomorrow! Wheels down 5:03 AM. CANT WAIT TO SEE YOU!!! OXOXO

Neil twitters Macie an immediate reply:

@multicherry I CANT EITHER! See you at baggage claim. Crazy out of my head!

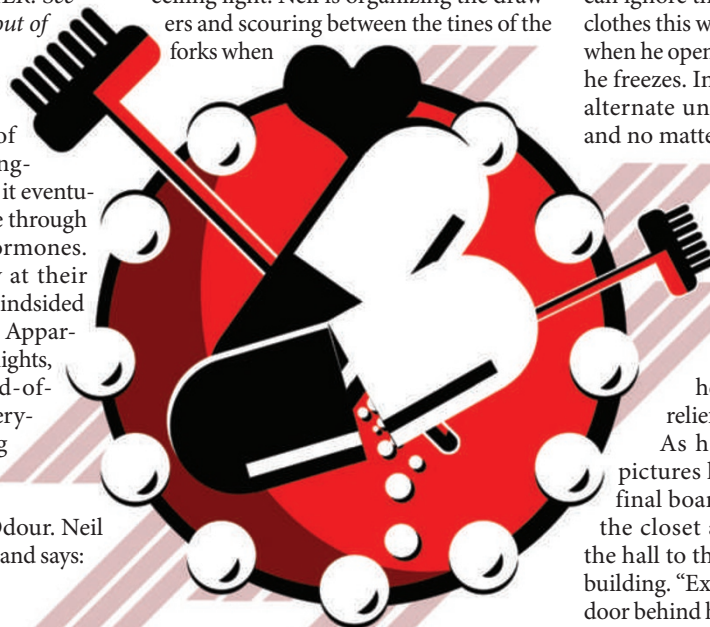
Neil spends the rest of the afternoon adrift in a sea of X-rated daydreams. Quitting-time never comes, and when it eventually does, he commutes home through a dense fog of resurging hormones. Somehow he arrives safely at their apartment door, only to be blindsided by reality when he opens it. Apparently, three months of poker nights, pay-per-view fights, World-of-Warcraft marathons, and everyday sloth have a way of adding up. Every room is an atrocity against good housekeeping — Trash, Filth, Stains and Odour. Neil scratches the back of his head and says: “Well, cat my dogs.”

The performance aids section in the Walmart pharmacy is next to the colds/flu aisle. Neil chooses a package of 12-hour, timed-release, maximum-strength Tidy Man gelpcaps. On the back label is a handy Tidy Man checklist of other Tidy Man products he might also need: furniture polish, oven cleaner, carpet steamer — it's a long list.

Back at home, Neil tosses his jacket into the hall closet and clears a spot on the couch. He downs a gelpcap with a swig of beer and lies back to do some calculating. It's 7:30 p.m., and he calculates that he has less than two hours per room before he has to leave for the airport. He realizes now that he should have picked up some dinner while he was out, and he gets up to see what he has in the fridge. Not much, it turns out — leftover lasagne well past its prime. He throws it away and empties the refrigerator, including the shelves and bins, and scrubs it inside and out, including on the top where dust and shopping bags seem to collect. He pulls the fridge away

from the wall and mops behind it and vacuums the condenser coils. It's only when he pushes it back into place and finds himself rearranging the door magnets that he realizes — Tidy Man is in the house.

Tidy Man is more frolic than work. Floors, oven, stovetop, dishes, windows, walls — it's all good. Scraping grease from the fan is good. So is shaking crumbs from the toaster and evicting dead flies from the ceiling light. Neil is organizing the drawers and scouring between the tines of the forks when



he realizes it's already past ten and he's still in the kitchen. This is housekeeping triage, and there are other rooms to save.

It's hard to leave, but Neil manages to charge into the living room with the laundry hamper and a carton of jumbo trash bags. He hums along with the vacuum cleaner. He strips the bed and flips the mattress. He wipes down the venetian blinds and houseplant leaves. He organizes DVDs and unsnarls the cords behind the entertainment centre. He polishes all of their shoes. The 40-gallon fish tank is a trove of fish poop, and the toilet and tub are more fun than a person should have alone.

As he's purging the medicine cabinet of its expired bottles and tubes, Neil makes the beginner's mistake of looking at himself in the mirror. What a shock. He sees nose hairs the size of fire hoses. He trims them back, which leads to eyebrow plucking, tooth bleaching, and fingernail and toe-

nail clipping. He brushes. He flosses. He shaves. He strips off his shirt and examines his back and shoulders in the mirror. He's reaching around with his electric razor when he is summoned by the clothes dryer — there's another load to iron and fold and put away.

It's 4:00 a.m. and time to leave, but it's hard to quit with so much left undone. Neil discovers that if he squints his eyes, he can ignore the worst of it. He changes his clothes this way and grabs his car keys, but when he opens the hall closet for his jacket, he freezes. Inside the closet it's like some alternate universe where chaos reigns, and no matter how hard he squints, Neil

is unable to pull away.

Precious minutes tick by, and with inspiration born of desperation, Neil speed-dials Macie and listens to the ringing, afraid it will go to voicemail, but no, she picks up. “What luck!” he says with a little hiccup of relief. “Where are you?”

As he listens to her voice and pictures her standing wearily at her final boarding gate, Neil pulls out of the closet and squints his way down the hall to the front door and out of the building. “Excellent,” he says, shutting the door behind him. In the twilight distance, the sleepless city is rousing itself for another day. “I love you too. See you soon.”

Neil hangs up and bounds down the steps and dashes for his car with renewed energy. He has only yards to go when he spies a fast-food wrapper on the sidewalk. Don't pick that up, he tell himself, even as he bends over to pick it up. On the curb lies an empty beer bottle. He tries walking past it, but it's easier just to pick it up too.

The chain link fence has caught tattered sheets of newspaper. Indeed, all along the property line the fence is festooned with windblown litter.

Neil stands next to his car and consults his watch. He tries squinting the fence away, but in the rosy light of dawn, it's a gilded ribbon of garbage stretching like a promise as far as the eye can see. “Well, dog my cats,” he says and consults his watch again, recalculating the time of his release. ■

David Marusek keeps his cabin tidy in Fairbanks, Alaska, where he spins his quirky tales by the light of the midnight sun. Visit him at www.marusek.com.

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