

Crash Diet

By E. S. Strout MD

1.

Joe McFarland stumbled to his feet in the alley, dizzy and disoriented. The digital face of his wristwatch blinked zeros. There was no response to a fingertip tap on its dial. Morning sometime, he guessed. But where in the hell was he? How had he come to be face down in that damn mud puddle? Had he gotten faced again and been booted out of some crummy low-rent saloon? Another blackout spell? He removed his denim jacket and blotted wet stains with a shirtsleeve. A nearby tatter of soaked newspaper caught his eye. He stared with disbelief at the headline:

LOS ANGELES TIMES Monday, June 11, 2068
DETERRENT REHAB PROGRAM REPORTS MAJOR SUCCESSES.

Then he remembered. It worked.”

2.

A siren wailed. He peered from the alley entrance, concealing himself in the gloom. The police cruiser roared overhead, light bar flashing stroboscopic red and blue. A message repeated across a communication screen on its belly:
DIAL 911 TO REPORT DETERRENT VIOLATORS. REWARD.

The craft roared upward in steamy clouds of exhaust vapor and disappeared over the rooftops. McFarland gaped at his surroundings. Ancient three-story apartment buildings with pockmarked clapboard walls and plywood-patched windows. Shops with security bars in place lining the narrow street. Distant glass paneled edifices piercing a hazy yellow-gray smog layer with sun-reflected spires. Pedestrians scurrying past, bent on unknown errands. Bike riders expertly slaloming between them.

A bus crept past with a staticky electric whine. The police vehicle’s Dial 911 message reiterated on the bus’s side.

McFarland nodded to himself in tacit agreement. “Guess I haven’t missed very much.”

3.

The faded sign over the door of the small shop read Stamps & Rare Coins. The proprietor looked up from his newspaper, gave a questioning glance over reading half-

glasses perched on his nose. "Help you, citizen?"

McFarland clinked a handful of change on the glass counter top. "These worth anything?"

The clerk turned the collection of quarters, dimes and nickels over in his fingers with dawning interest. He pulled a dusty catalog from a shelf behind him, licked a fingertip, flipped pages, stared goggle-eyed. "Late nineties. Sonofabitch. Pre-Devaluation," he said with a hush of astonishment.

"Is that good?"

"Where'd you get 'em?"

"Family heirlooms. Folks had 'em in a safety deposit box."

"Pretty rare stuff. These mintages were recalled."

McFarland rubbed the three-day growth of stubble on his chin. "I wouldn't know about that. Been outta town."

"Beautiful." The man opened his cash drawer, pushed two handfuls of bills across the counter. "You selling 'em?"

McFarland counted, eyes wide with wonder. "Fifty thousand American dollars? For a bunch of old change?" He packed his pockets with tens, twenties and hundreds. "I could get to like it here."

The owner unrolled another wad of bills, laid them on the counter. "I can give you a good price for paper currency, same vintage. What do you say?"

"Paper bills wouldn't transmit. Something in the ink deflects the tachyon stream, they said. Whatever the hell that means."

The cash drawer slammed shut. "Whatever you say, citizen."

"I'm, ah . . . new in town. Is there a Denny's anywhere close by? A coffee shop . . .?"

The man's eyebrows rose in inverted V's. "You have been away. Coffee's a Lifespan Deterrent. The caffeine's a stimulant."

McFarland shrugged. "Which means what?"

A knowing nod. "I get it. You were in stir, right? Coffee's part of Rehab, I heard."

“I wasn’t in jail. Well, not here anyway.”

“It’s okay. I’m not a snitch. Must be a tough transition for you. Lifespan, I mean. Our District Nourishment Shop will help keep you straight. Two blocks north, take a left. Right next to the recharge station.”

4.

LIFESPAN NOURISHMENT blinked in garish purple neon. McFarland peered through the indow. There was a counter and stools inside. Customers chatted in booths lining a wall. Above the counter, a poster featured a circle around a cigarette and a red diagonal slash through it. A young white-uniformed woman sat at a computer terminal, engrossed in a paperback. She raised a questioning eyebrow as he grabbed a seat.

“Could I see a menu, please?”

The lady grinned. “Love those oldies, citizen.” She punched computer keys. A plastic tray slid out of a slot in the wall. It held a gray-white square and a plastic cup of bilious yellow-green liquid. She laid a disposable fork next to the tray. Tapped another key, held out a hand. “Need your Citizenship Authorization card.”

“Right, ah, . . . can I pay cash?”

“It’s illegal.”

McFarland knew the drill. He plopped a wad of currency on the counter top. The woman sneaked a glance out the window, lowered her voice to a whisper. “Not supposed to do this, you know. I could get in real trouble. The fines . . .”

“How much?”

Her lips mouthed silent calculation as she counted on her fingertips. “Okay. Two thousand. Plus a thou to cover my risk.”

McFarland’s eyes widened in disbelief. “Three Grand? That’s nuts.”

She snatched the tray away. “Take it or leave it. Lifespan Enforcement would lift my license if I got caught. Plus send me to the slammer for a year.”

McFarland removed his knit cap and rubbed his crew cut. “What gives? Three thousand bucks would buy you a couple of shops like this some places.”

“Not here. Devaluation. Third one since ‘28. So where you been, citizen?”

“Lotsa places.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Welcome home.” She replaced the tray as he counted out the bills. They disappeared under the counter.

McFarland tapped his fork on the Nourishment. “What’s this?”

The lady stifled a yawn. “Authorized Lifespan regimen. Fortified soybean protein. State of the art tofu.”

He wedged out a forkful, chewed, gagged, took a large swallow of the jaundiced drink, spat into a napkin. “Aak. That’s awful!”

She refilled his glass. “Glucose. Vitamins A through E. Organic supplements. Electrolytes. All Lifespan-approved. Used to be called Gatorade. Generic now. It’s good for ya.”

McFarland scrubbed his tongue with a fingertip. “Yech! How about approving me some coffee?”

Surprised stares from the other customers. A murderous scowl replaced the proprietor’s smile. “You didn’t fool me for a second, citizen. You’re a plainclothes Diet Cop. I’m clean, officer. I’ve got proof.”

McFarland clasped his hands together as if in prayer. “No cop. I don’t like cops. Please?”

The lady slid her chair to block her cash stash from view as a policeman entered. LIFESPAN ENFORCEMENT was stitched in fake gold thread across a breast pocket.

“Any problems here?” he asked.

“N-none, officer,” the lady stammered.

He turned to McFarland. “Any complaints, citizen?”

“Yeah. The Nourishment sucks.”

The cop tapped his baton on the counter top. “Lifespan’s finest, citizen. Best you enjoy it.”

McFarland held his nose and pushed the tray away. “Here. You can have mine.”

Outside, he jumped at a sudden tug on his sleeve. The man was crouched out of sight between two ground autos plugged into recharge outlets. Skinny, middle-aged guy. Nervous, twitchy eyes. “Heard you in the Nutrition Shop. I can getcha coffee,” he whispered.

Of course. Black market. That figured. “That’s a start,” he replied. “How about a Double-Double with fries?”

“Hmpf. Fat chance. Infra-reds’d pinpoint the grill in microseconds.”

McFarland’s brow furrowed with puzzlement. “I can’t eat that tofu garbage and I hate Gatorade. What’s goin’ on?”

A wide-eyed gape. “How can you not know?”

“Been outta the country.”

“Okay. No offense. It’s like this, citizen. Back in ‘01 there was an outbreak of mutant toxic E. coli bacteria infections from undercooked beef. Someplace in Michigan, I think. Hospitals were understaffed, couldn’t handle the overload. Buncha citizens died.”

“The Lifespan Party appeared outta nowhere. Been undercover, I guess. They went on a nationwide crusade. Lotta coverage. Radio talk shows, major TV, cable and satellite networks. Raised a helluva lot of support. Citizens were really pissed at the major political parties.”

McFarland tugged at an earlobe. “Lifespan? Never heard of them.”

“Health food freaks. Vegetarians. The animal rights wackos joined ‘em, along with the anti-tobacco and alcohol nuts. They got a lotta ink from the big city press and beaucoup bucks from the health food industry. In twenty-ought-eight their candidate was elected President. Been in power ever since. The Bureau of Lifespan Management is their enforcement branch. Tough bunch. State of the art surveillance stuff. Major penalties for diet infractions.”

McFarland grunted with disgust. “Cops with too much power. Been there, done that.”

The man grinned. “Gotta look at the upside, citizen. They had an ace up their sleeves.”

McFarland squinted a skeptical eye. “The wackos? You’re gonna tell me they were right? C’mon, now. You can’t be serious.”

He produced his wallet and flipped open a plastic cardholder. The I.D. photo was genuine. Samuel Ames. D.O.B. 23 Feb. 1984. “Average lifespan now is one-eighty-five. Something in the tofu fortification process. Lifespan scientists said so. Who’s not

to trust? I've got a hundred-plus years left if I don't walk under an air truck."

"But what good is longevity if you can't get hold of a nice rare steak with onions and some greasy fries? Couple of ice-cold Budweisers to wash it down? Remember?"

Ames held a finger to his lips and whispered. "I don't want to die young. Neither does anybody else. I'd cool that kind of talk if I was you, citizen. Big trouble if somebody hears."

6.

"You seem to be doing okay."

Ames winked. "There's still enough of you tofu and Gatorade haters around to keep me a few bucks ahead."

"How much for the coffee?"

"Three Grand."

McFarland peeled off the bills. "I know. Devaluation. Three since '28. And you could get in trouble."

"Right on. Getcha anything else?"

"Stolichnaya?"

Ames staggered a step back, his sweat-glistened face pale, accusing. "You're undercover Ethanol Patrol."

"If I was, Sam, one of them Blade Runner cop cars would be hauling your ass away right now."

Ames mopped his face with a handkerchief. "Alcohol's a Class-One Double-Alfa Lifespan Deterrent. The booze cops have robot sniffers that can track it a mile away. We'd both get life."

"I'm betting you'll find it."

A crafty glint lit Ames's eyes. "I heard there's a few of those little airline bottles around. Too small for the sniffers to pick up. Tough to come by. Risky as hell."

"I'm riskin' life in the joint, Sam. How much?"

“Seventy-five K.”

“Sorry I asked.”

7.

A police hover car descended, siren howling. McFarland held the Styrofoam coffee cup behind his back as Ames discreetly vanished. A cop dressed in riot gear approached. “Get in, citizen. Please don’t give me any problems.” He held a shotgun at port-arms.

“What’s the problem, officer?”

“Lady at the Nutrition Shop dialed 911. You said the magic word. Coffee. She and I will split the reward.”

“How about you split your half with me? You owe me, right?”

The cop gestured toward the hover car with his shotgun. “Let’s go.”

“No sense of humor,” McFarland muttered under his breath.

The precinct headquarters was a familiar scene. A motley collection of unwashed citizens crowded on benches in a cramped hallway. Alert cop with an automatic weapon on guard. Shyster attorneys handing out business cards. Bunch of desks crammed together in one large room. Phones jangling. No air conditioning. Some things never change, McFarland noted.

A half eaten square of tofu rested on a corner of the scarred Government Issue desk. The detective backhanded it into a circular file. He scrolled prior arrests across his computer monitor with incredulous eyes. “McFarland, Joseph J. Third-strike felony, forgery. 1999? That’s almost seventy years ago. We thought it was a paperwork screw up, but your DNA samples match. What you doin’ here, Joe?”

McFarland exhaled a resigned sigh. “Like you’re gonna believe me. I volunteered for a time travel experiment. Said they’d erase my sentence, let me start over. Got stuck here. The Prof said it could happen. Guess he was right.”

“Nice try. You shoulda stuck with Lifespan.”

“So they lied about the fresh start.” McFarland patted a jacket pocket, pulled out a soggy Marlboro pack. “Got a match?”

“Possession of a Deterrent substance, Joe. That’s another felony offense.”

7.

“Wha’d they getcha for, Joe?” his cellmate asked.

“Coffee.”

“I’m Quigley.” He held out a crumpled package. “Cigarette?”

“Cop downtown said they were illegal.”

“No Tobacco Cops in here.”

McFarland picked up a headset lying on the pillow of his bunk. It was plugged into a wall jack. “Well, at least we got some entertainment” He tapped a fingertip on one of the earpieces. “BLM? A company logo?”

Quigley gave him an odd grin. “Bureau of Lifespan Management.”

McFarland pulled the jack from the wall socket. “I guess that means no Beatles oldies.”

Quigley snatched the device from McFarland’s hands and replaced the jack. “You want to be in solitary for a month? You gotta wear ‘em at night.”

“I can hardly wait.”

“Reconditioning,” Quigley whispered behind his cupped hand.

A muted klaxon signaled ten P.M., lights out. “Headsets on now, citizens. Solitary for violators,” an authoritative voice droned.

McFarland lay back on the pillow, adjusted the headset. A soft, seductive female voice intoned: “Tobacco kills. Alcohol kills. Red meat kills. Pasta kills. All Deterrents kill. Lifespan is the only answer, citizens. Don’t die young. Join Lifespan now.” He slept well.

8.

At Morning Nourishment McFarland’s surprise was palpable. The help yourself cafeteria featured scrambled eggs, bacon and sausage. There were home fries. Toast, butter and jam. Orange juice. Hot coffee. “This is more like it,” he said with a grin. “How come no tofu?”

“Step one for first offenders.”

The other men at their table watched in horror as McFarland attacked his eggs and bacon. “Suicide, man. Your Lifespan . . .” one whispered.

McFarland eyed the man’s plate, which held a single slice of dry toast. He turned to his cellmate. “What’s his prob? Diet therapy?”

“Phase-One Rehab. He’s scared.”

“I keep hearing Rehab. Clue me in.”

Quigley speared a sausage link. “You been outta the country?”

“Long time.”

“Shouldn’ta come back. You got Lifespan’s Mandatory Re-Education Program. Twin-Phase Rehab. Deterrent Diet. Cigarettes. Booze. Autopsy videos of coronaries, lung cancer, cirrhosis. Workshops with recovered Deterrent violators.”

“That explains that audio tape loop.”

“Listen up,” Quigley said. “As soon as they figure they’ve got your brain wiped clean they switch to the soybeans.” He pointed across the mess hall with his fork, where inmates downed fortified tofu and slurped vitamin drinks with relieved expressions. “Phase-Two.”

“So you’re a Phase-One?”

Quigley just grinned.

McFarland lit up a cigarette. “What’s funny?”

Quigley sugar and creamed his coffee, mopped egg yolk with a square of toast. “Second offense. Life sentence.”

9.

“Fifty K? I’ll just break even.”

“C’mon, Sam. I’m a Lifespan Rehab recovery,” McFarland teased. “The fifty’s all they give ya for a fresh start.”

“You’re breakin’ my heart, citizen.” Ames handed over two sealed Stolichnaya miniatures. “Happy days.”

The black marketeer fled in curse-laced panic as McFarland cracked the seal on the first bottle and took a long swallow of vodka. Seconds later a sniffer robot descended, screaming its alarm . . .

The End