

The Line

March 28, 2026

It is a slippery waxy morning, in a corner of city park that - apart from the sporadic crack of rifle fire - might have been cut and pasted clean from the late Jurassic. The air hangs thick, and holds the world in a clammy embrace. It *clings*. In a vain attempt to escape it, I have strung a hammock. So now I swing suspended, enduring an interrogation by a psychedelic stasi agent. I'm sorry D—, I love you but for the sake of my own amusement I *must* crucify you. And doing that requires me to be just as jaded and cynical as you believe I'm not.

There I lie, just trying to find the right angle for my hat to block out the sun, while he paces in circuits around the hammock. He is coming at me like a starving wolf, desperate for the most meaningful conversation that can be ripped from my grasp. I do not know what he expects - there's precious little left not actively being dissolved by the acid bath - but that's not going to stop him from trying.

He says he finds meaning from talking.

I tell him to write it down.

He declares there is nothing but now.

I ask if the IRS sees it the same way.

There is an insistence that all my needs are being met, that I am safe, that no one has ever been as safe as I am right now. But safety is only ever statistical. It's not going to do anything for you if some day-drinker in automotion decides they're going to put the you in SUV, and inadvertently make human mince while trying to jump the light¹. It's not going to stop my heart deciding it's bored of working some future Friday, and keel me over like an over-watered lush. And it's *certainly* not going to prevent whichever geriatric narcissist has their finger on the button from baptising a new world with nuclear fire. Despite what your favourite nursery teacher may have led you to believe, you don't fix broken things by getting happy clappy with them, and you are only safe until you're not.

He keeps banging on about how much I've achieved, but all I can think is it took me three attempts to hang this fucking hammock and despite this am now wracked by the nagging feeling I fucked tying it to the trees. In twenty minutes I'm going to look across to my more competent friend's setup and realise that

¹I hear the grilles of those super F-150 raptor sex bombs wipe clean *real* easy.

I felt this way because yes, I did indeed fuck the damn thing up. Did it wrong, made it harder than it needed to be. Now that's a metaphor I think could stand up to further exploration, but instead I am beseeched - *beseched* - to open my eyes and embrace love. Or something.

But if I open my eyes the light will get in. Maybe I'll stare at the sun until the retinas burn away, just to prove a point. Some crack Victorian physician out of new Jersey actually prescribed sungazing as part of his "Bates method for better eyesight". I am certain he blinded a lot of people. Not satisfied with the misery he was paid to dole out, he explicitly disinherited a son - a son who had been missing for a *decade* - on his deathbed. One lifetime just may not be enough to contain all the harm you need to inflict on others.

But this is besides the point, because while I'm contemplating carrying out some self inflicted medical malpractice, D— is still talking. He wants all this *meaning* out of me, as if that's something I have even the slightest capacity to give. Again and again I am besieged by this one-man Mongol horde of mysticism, taking just one more crack at splitting me open and slurping out any morsel of spiritual sustenance my husk might hold. I keep being told to love myself, as if that's suddenly going to solve my problems. Going to stop me lying awake at night. Please please don't make me answer what I am outside of what I do, because there ain't nothing there but boredom, fear, fear of boredom and boredom of fear.

You really want to know who I am? Hard person to know. Harder to love. A sullen Roman Catholic, born a maroon on an inhospitable island in the North Atlantic. Grown in the pallid light of its phantom summers, and kept in the meanness of its mean temperatures. So Irish as to be inbred, a product of depressive priests and petty criminals, predisposed towards any substance that can be abused. A non-believing stain on concrete. There is nothing behind the eyes. Nothing. That usually settles the matter to everyone's satisfaction, why will this evident truth not satisfy him? I don't say any of this, I just listen as he strings himself ever tighter, hearing the click of his verbal ratchet, and profoundly wishing there was some release catch I could trigger. I just want to lie in a hammock dude, why must I also be the still-living corpse in your psychic vivisection?

Presently we finish our extended lay-about, and go to meet the others. It is the birthday of the wife of my inquisitor, so we're all going to one of the city's many, *many* food festivals. Yet another sweltering day in what has been the most relentlessly oppressive summer of our lives, the perfect time to go and eat industrial quantities of fried dough. Walking back, D— misses his chance to seize immortality by *not* walking straight into the web of some lurking orb-weaver. Instead I am ruining the missed opportunity to laugh at someone have an acid freakout because the arachnids crawling all over them *aren't* imaginary.

We join up with our party around noon, and I am introduced to a sedimentologist wearing limes as jewellery² She proves to be every bit as groovy as the citrus ear-wear promises, and treats me to a video of her work. It transpires

²Not literal limes, that would be insane.

that tracking the accumulation of fiddly bits of silica is pretty hard, so the NSF has given her money to paint them like they're at a rave and record the shapes they throw under blacklight. When talking about the earrings, she reveals a nickname they earned from their inability to not get sloppy drunk on mojitos, but it's one of those nicknames that gives no clue to its provenance, and instead simply sounds alien. In this case, it makes her sound more like a tinpot dictator of a banana republic, the charismatic generalissimo who with the CIA's backing will burn out the communist guerillas from the jungles they hide in. Not being well socialised, I tell her this. Repeatedly. At one point in our chat about the sensational shards of silicate she studies, the enormous black market in sediment is brought up. This sets a grain of memory in my eye.

Scroll back a decade, to a teppanyaki place out in Jiangsu. I am about to have a very memorable meal with a triad. The context is simple - some friends³ are getting married and have invited us out for dinner with the groom's parents. When I ask he's oddly evasive about his father, describing him merely as a "badass". A badass who works in sand, apparently. Well the place we're going has all you can drink beer, and from the gleam in dad's eye I know that tonight there will be *two* of us abusing the living shit out of this policy. We eat, we drink, we don't comprehend a single fucking word of what the other is saying, and drink some more. As the bottles pile up beside two rapidly emptying packs of Zhonghua filter kings, we begin to fall a little in love. Together we descend ever deeper into the kingdom of future remorse, puffing away on those nasty cancer sticks that come in the bright red box. By the end of the night we embrace in the urinals, and pepper each other with affirmations of love. My broken Mandarin is a lousy vehicle for it, but the deal is sealed with one more slightly piss-soaked fag.

Now, in the aftermath of this happy hunt for the ugliest hangover north of the Yangtze, I make further enquiries about my new BFF. He's totally legitimate, legitimate man engaging in legitimate business. But since I ask, he did spend a bit of time in prison. Not for anything major you understand - he just couldn't stop cutting off people's hands. There is I think a lesson in this! Namely you don't get to choose who you love, and when reaching out, one can't be picky about who takes your hand. So to speak.

Now we rewind to the present, and the broiling heat of midday. I am wearing a red baseball cap, having the realisation dawn on me that it's a hat colour Donald Trump has made fundamentally unwearable, at least not without signalling so much more than you intended. The acolyte is with us, which makes me slightly nervous because every time I see her under the influence of drugs, she finds some clever new way to inadvertently torture me. Today will be no different, and she chooses her thumbscrews with remarkable precision and rapidity. Entering the festival grounds, she makes a beeline for the stall with the longest queue. It's pretty long. So long there are two of them. This is where she wants her beignets from, the Jamaican place with a line that stretches back to the moon. We join it with entirely unwarranted optimism.

³more friends! God aren't I popular?

How bad can it be?

The first fifteen minutes are spent in idle chat, and I barely mention the looming premonition that no doughnut is going to be worth the time investment this one will require. It is hot, and getting hotter. It gets me reflecting about what a strange thing temperature is. The cleanest route to understanding it is as a Lagrange multiplier reflecting a physical constraint in entropy maximisation. It is spun *ex nihilo* purely from information theory - a gradient that speaks to nothing but how contingencies multiply with the energy they are provided. It is the terminal point of imaginary time, a concept so unphysical as to be absurd, and quite impossible to conceive as real.

But boy, when it's hot it's *hot*. You breathe it in the air, and shiver in its grip. It's tangible and tasteable, and therefore fundamentally different to most of the bollocks I try to trap in a cage of linear algebra. You *feel* temperature. And fuck me but I'm feeling it now. A proffered durag is snatched, letting me cosplay as T.E. Lawrence during this trial of patience. Now the acolyte can already predict my reaction to all of this with startling accuracy, and asks if I'm going to spend the next week complaining how not worth it these beignets will be. Well, grouching about trivialities is one field in which I am truly Olympian. I hold records in the hundred metre moan, the long gripe and modern bitchathalon. The Usain Bolt of whining and Michael Phelps of carping. Knowing this, I assure her that I shan't be carrying this into next week. Oh no. No no no. I will be grumbling about it until at least one of us is dead.

The line progresses in a manner that makes me wonder if Zeno might not have been right about the impossibility of motion. There is a phenomenon known as the quantum Zeno effect, where continuous measurement of a particle *traps* the little fucker, the act of observation preventing the ordinary smearing of possibility that evolution in time ordinarily causes. Caught under the hallucinogenic potency of the sun, I begin to ponder if I myself am being watched. Perhaps this is all data in a more cosmic test of indeterminacy. Really ought to have joined the clergy with thinking like that. Clearly I have the temperament for it, and at least that way there would be no possibility of *proving* the errors in my beliefs. To approach, Janus-faced, new thresholds. To believe there is a way of crossing the blood-brain barrier intact, and that if a sufficiently magnificent truth is sought it *will* be found. Matter pretending to matter. A near-perfect ontology, marred only by it being obviously and laughably untrue. Now I understand that's not a deal breaker for many, but me I'm picky. Frankly, if the deity does exist, then putting me in this queue is surely some kind of pre-emptive punishment, a foretaste of the eternity where they can *really* start to fine-tune my suffering. How long have I been here? Will this line ever end?

The answer to this last question is yes, but only because it leads to another line. We have spent an hour in the ordering queue just to go to the back of the even longer pick-up queue. It's so hot, it's taking so long. Now I am certain. No mortal food is worth this. Slice by slice I can feel what's left of my life being wasted in this foolish quest for batter. We inch back to towards the stall with agonising slowness. Looking behind, it is possible to chart people's evolution through the procession by the degree to which the light has left their eyes. As

we draw in sight of the finish line, the atmosphere acquires the feral desperation of a refugee camp. The woman in front of us did not realise that she had joined the second stage of the tour de nowhere, mistakenly appending herself to the post-queue queue, rather than the queue to pay to get into the second queue. An almost psychotic degree of frustration erupts from her, and she goes wailing off to go find food not served on a geological timescale.

All this waiting, this crawling beneath this remorseless rain of angry photons. I am starting to believe this queue is going to turn me into Douglas Crowhurst. Do we remember Douglas Crowhurst? A man who thought he spied an opportunity for meaning in a contest he was hopelessly ill equipped to compete in. A race to the first single-handed circumnavigation of the oceans. Nothing but a weekend sailor, he mortgages himself to compete in a vessel of his own design. The Teignmouth electron, a craft that could barely survive embarkation. He floats hopelessly for two thirds of a year, trapped in a fiction of fabricated logs. He plans to wait until the other competitors make it back from around the globe, and limp in to a creditable last place. This wheeze is doomed by news that the leader's boat has sunk, and he may inadvertently win the race by fraud. He is faced with the non-choice of financial ruin compounded by public shame. Caught between sea and sky, his only refuge is in the totality of paranoia. Unmoored from reality, he becomes tangled in a net of delusions that drag him ever deeper into the self.

All they find of Crowhurst is his boat and final logbook. His Philosophy. It is impossible to read those entries without a full-body shiver, in fear that you might be infected by those selfsame thoughts. We all float on currents peculiar to ourselves, hoping for a following wind. It is hard to read what is left of one so thoroughly becalmed. That's what this line is becoming. A hostile ocean in which to quietly go mad. How do people survive life in bad times? I think of Tacitus and Seneca, and feel a prickle on the back of my neck. These vendors are my bad emperor Domitian, rendered capricious and cruel by their inability to serve Caribbean-Creole fusion cuisine in a timely manner. *Ubi Solitudinem facient, beignet fest* appellant.

Eventually we get our beignets. They weren't worth it, but in sympathy I am bought a drink. I use this to quieten the growing sense of cosmic injustice that it is legal for people to be subjected to such underwhelment. The weather also takes this opportunity to mock me, by clouding over the sun and providing a breeze mere minutes after it would have been of any help. The psychic price these doughnuts have expropriated makes them ash in my mouth. I eat them anyway.

Who knows how long it might take to get another?