



*Sobriety for me is one of those things that only lasts so long, like a job, though I didn't need a reason.*

## STEVEN MATTHEW BROWN

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### THE NEIGHBORHOOD MACHINE

It looked like a mountain in Hell carried inside a mile-wide tornado. So much dust and smoke the day went dark. That is all I say. That is as good as I do. The rest is nothing I discuss.

*A grandmother*

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I was good, I can honestly say, in the first moments after seeing it. Ella in her baby carrier. Ella in the car. It all flowed. Canned goods and a camping stove, some water and blankets all found their way into the trunk. I was in control. I was getting it done. Joshua had been playing on his portable game with headphones and had not seen it, so I quickly guided him out to the car like we were late for an appointment, and he went along. We beat most of the traffic. I cooked along that highway as fast as I could. This trooper started following me with his lights on, and I just went faster until he tried to overtake me like a crazy person. He didn't believe my explanation, but that smoke cloud on the horizon told him *believe it*. Yelling isn't what I did, but I wasn't coy. I told him, I am leaving now, and if you want to stop me from saving my children, you're gonna have to shoot me. You're gonna have to shoot me. The whole highway was rushing with traffic now, and he *let* me go. I did not stop until it was dark and we were somewhere in Ohio. It was only then, in the hotel, that I cried and lost my breath. I don't know how I will tell Joshua about this. I don't know what a mother would say to her child. It wasn't war. No flood had come, with that certain kind of sense behind it. We stay away from the television and other people in the hotel who are like television from the watching.

I try not to think about people left behind, that trooper. I try not to think about what I would have done if Joshua had already gone to school that day.

*Judy Denzer, self-employed*

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What did it want? I ask myself. It took the houses, brick buildings, downtown, water and cars. How did it all fit inside? How did it still manage to move on and where did it go, since Aster never caught sight of it? It doesn't make any sense. It must have flown away, right? It can't just have vanished. I cannot believe I'm having to say these things of nonsense. But I cannot just *think* about it all in my head. *I just cannot believe it* doesn't do any more good the fiftieth time than the first. How could I believe it? What is to be believed? That I could see an end of mortgage payments for the first time? That I had been able to plan more than two months ahead? Or should I believe this all has some magical dimension? Aliens maybe, or God? An intergovernmental conspiracy, perhaps. Should I sit down with all the other victims and hash out why the machine arrived, where it came from, what it wanted, as though those questions even make sense? If I hear the words Smolensk or Ouagadougou one more time I don't know what I'll do. Should I suppose this is some kind of a dream? Is my pinching not enough to wake me? A nightmare wouldn't even explain the kind of sorrow I feel. Can anyone name a nightmare from which she did not awake? No one can name me a nightmare she did not awake from. I conclude this is real, and I have nothing to say about that. I have to find a roof and dollars.

*Apple Starlight Jones*

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We are starving in the streets. We are dying. Where is the aid? Where

is the news on this? Where is the government? Where are the jets and bombs for that matter? Is anyone doing anything about one town after another being wiped off the map? People say the machine just vanishes. Well that's great. You would think by listening to the radio that someone would come to the rescue. You would think that by talking faster and shouting people got fed. They don't. You open up your phone if you've still got battery life and signal and read commentary like it's doing anything. We are hungry. I don't care if some kid posted a video taking responsibility for the thing. Arrest him if he did it. Torture him if he is guilty and hang him on television for all I care. But not until after someone fills some helicopters with food and medicine and clothes and lands them here. They can land anywhere. We can unload and organize the rest ourselves. That is the only thing I am sure of anymore.

*Anonymous volunteer firefighter, Marty's Landing*

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I would rather have been there with my wife and son and daughters and died like a rat than have had to watch it all helplessly as I did. I had submitted my flight plan and taken off accordingly. When I saw the dust come up on the horizon I took it for smoke and came back over the ridge toward town. The east side was already unrecognizable. But it wasn't fire. I didn't know what it was. The machine did not catch my eye at first. I thought it was the mall, but that didn't make any sense because I could see Tireman road there beneath it. And the road does not run *through* the mall. I remember wondering what kind of a fire it was even as I knew it wasn't a fire and saw the big gray mass cross the river and get going on Old Town. There was my house, people in clusters and lines. I buzzed the street to look for my wife. The van was gone. Traffic was jammed up and down the highway. I looked for the roof of our red van. I called her on my cell phone, but she did not answer. You can only let yourself get so upset when you're piloting a

plane. What good is a bird's eye view? I thought. I still don't know. I have no clearer answer about what it was than anyone else. And the destruction is not needing any clarification from my little flyovers. I spent all the fuel looking for the van and when I couldn't spare any more I had to land. I remember taxiing to the hangar before wondering, *Now what?* And the control tower was gone. And I still wonder over and over again.

*Lee Cole, former Director of Patron Experience, Rosemarie Bath and Body*

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The claim by many that the problem lay in unleashing the machine's destructive potential seems false in two ways: first, this implies that the machine's destructive potential was leashed to begin with, something no one can know, perhaps not even the machine's creator; second, we do not know that the machine's destructive potential was not its core potential. Perhaps what happened was inverse the claim: some unknown generative capability had been leashed, freeing the machine to leave so many of us in Marty's Landing standing in tread-scarred streets before the ruins of our homes. The machine came and erased the town in a matter of hours. It left. We do not know any more than those two facts and we should not pretend we do. We might do well to restrain ourselves from drawing conclusions in the absence of any evidence as to the machine's license. Certainly, we ought to begin by establishing the basics: what it was; where it came from; where it disappeared to, and where it will reappear next? Ouagadougou and Monterrey, Mexico, were so completely destroyed that not even a distant enemy stood to share a word about what happened. Do residents of the former Russian city of Smolensk have any information they could share? Tell us anything. No, all judgment should be suspended until such a time when any evidence exists that would allow us to begin scribbling notes. I want answers, too; but there are ways

to get them, and ways not to. No answer is better than the wrong one, from my standpoint. Whatever imaginative energy remains might best be applied to helping victims with material needs and comfort. My heart goes out.

*Cindy Cahn-Wilson, retired engineer*

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All I have left is a photograph of my grandparents, and all I can do is stare at it while a nurse feeds me. She is a good bit taller than he was in real life, though she squatted in her dress to make it look like they were nearly the same height. If you did not know that you would think she was fat in the thighs and had an ugly face twisted up in a dour grimace. That is the cruelty of it. A sacrifice of dignity, what might have been called ladylike composure. Do I dare think she had her kids in mind? A woman should not have been taller than their father. A woman should have accepted her situation like a horse. And back then people did not know what they looked like in pictures, so her ugliness was just a thing like birds chirping she thought would not show in the photo. All she knew was the strain. It is evident now. He was a scoundrel to the end, which also does not show up. We have her, in her moment of uncanny bottom-heaviness, and him, smirking. He can see payback coming. Boy could he.

*Sadie Gonzalez*

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People will find what I have to say offensive. I worked at all three schools for 17 years as the Art Teacher. If you drove past them for as long as I did and saw them in every season and angle of light you would have all but memorized the cracks in the mortar. In winter, and this is what I mean might offend some people, the schools were reduced to a series of brick walls erected at right angles in fields of

snow. The brick was kind of a flesh color, like the color kids mix out of habit before they have studied the cheek of one individual. You couldn't recover the sense of any one building after seeing that emptiness in it. I don't mean to sound bitter, or to indict our system of education, or to traduce my colleagues, but walls in a field were all I needed. Where else do we come together to draw and paint with such focus? I have no classroom to illuminate and gather into quiet now. The kids' curiosity did all the hard work.

*Brian Marsden*

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I don't know why, but it sort of seemed like, Sure, why *not* here? Why are we different than Pakistan or Russia? And something that big overwhelms you before you can even become surprised. Timmy thought so too. He was just coming back from lunch and hadn't seen it yet, so I got a look at how I must have gawked when I first saw it from up on the roof. Shear and utter shock, but slow, like, What the heck *is* that? He slapped my hand and lit a smoke and asked me, What are we looking at here, Brady? I said, What, that there? He said, Yeah, that there. I said, I don't know any more than you do. And he said, Is this that robot people have been talking about? I said, Is it a robot? I figured they looked different than this. Or an alien, he said. The guys were all gone by now, cramming themselves into the gridlock on the highway. Fear always makes me giddy. We felt like seeing what happened next, and it was kind of staying inside the town, so we kept watching. Timmy admitted he was happy to share that moment with me, the privilege of seeing something so massive in motion. It ate up Old Town and the schools and the whole east side in about an hour. In that time, my fear eased up a bit and I started feeling depressed like, Is this it, then? Is this how I end? When it turned toward us there on the roof of the shop, I wanted more than anything to grab Timmy and hold him. What happened was that *he* edged over to *me*, both of

us still watching it come, and interlaced his fingers with mine. Without letting go of my hand, he led me down the stairs to the garage and to his truck. He opened the door for me. He says he had always wanted to do that.

T. H.

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This just proves we get what we deserve. I am not saying the town deserved it, but my ex-wife certainly had something like this coming for a very long time. You take my house? Look what you got now. You take my boat, my dog, my fridge and computer? By all means. What pretty pictures do you see on my big flatscreen television today? I left with my dignity and you left with my stuff. Look who came out on top. She calls my mother in Detroit—my own mother—crowing and crying about how it's all gone. I didn't do that after we split up, for Christ's sake. And leave her out of this. Ma has got enough to worry about with my dad gone who knows where and my sister's kid to watch over. Second, tough cookies, Madeline. To hell with you. I only regret that I wasn't there to watch you watch all my stuff get smashed. You had the whole east side of town as a warning. You had the schools right there at the end of the road to look at and take as a suggestion you might want to get the hell out while the getting was good. Did I make you stay? No. Did my stuff make you stay? Did your materialistic soul ruin you? I'm actually curious why you watched our old house get demolished. No one *made* you view that. It must have been hard to watch. Was it hard? I think about that a little. I am glad you are okay. I would never wish harm on you. I talk big, you know that, but I do still love you in some way. I just wish you would have had some good sense not to put yourself in danger like that. I mean, stuff is just stuff, right? I miss you, Madeline. I miss Banjo, too. Yeah, he was a good pup.

*Anonymous*

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If you get past the commentary and career-making all any news person can say is the *former* city of Smolensk, or the *former* Baltimore metropolitan area, or the *former* metropolis of Santiago de Chile. Hours and hours of sales pitches and preening could be spared if they would just focus on that one word and repeat it until we all shuddered with the thought that ten or fifteen million people can be disappeared at one go. They send reporters like to a dark hole to say, Yes, it is still dark in there. Back to you. I would just as soon not know any of it, so I stay off. I stack boxes and rations and drive trucks to distribution points. We have organized pretty well I think, and we have reached most people. Sanitation is going to be a problem if we all stay for very long. Those without relatives or something better to go toward might stay, but there is nothing here for them, and there never will be again. Trees will shade the ruins, and it will be like some ancient European city lost everywhere but on paper. The *former* settlement at Marty's Landing. Sniffer dogs were brought in yesterday morning. I told them, you'll not find any bodies. They were all taken by the machine, or we have moved them to the graves. I showed them the graves, by the marsh and former hospital, and the dogs went crazy.

*Pat Caldwell*

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I was under brick rubble. The size of an aircraft carrier, that is what, carried along on treads and some legs. It looked like an owl, like a metallic stuffed owl laid on its belly on treads and some legs and the size of an aircraft carrier. And it was an owl with one eye, the circle on the face was off-center, black and open, but made of some stuff. And for feathers it had all these things on its back, like antennae but so many of them it was more like all those illegal splices and knots in a slum. In fact, that was my first impression. People seemed to live up

there. Maybe no people were visible, but you would have thought it was swarming with bodies. That was in a few seconds before blacking out completely. On the back end were some, pardon me, testicle kind of things. Lung-like, kidney-shaped. I remember no more except the vibration. The details keep changing like an old-old dream. Don't trust me on this.

*Unidentified*

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For months we had heard their older daughter crying every night. It was a baleful wailing unlike anything I had ever heard before. Our girls weren't criers, but still we knew something was wrong. We could not agree on what. Had they beaten her or done something worse? Meeting the father and mother on weekends at the fence between our yards you would never suspect them of anything cruel, let alone criminal. So we wondered if she was sick, even though she seemed healthy enough playing by herself in their front yard. My wife thought she was acting out. That was our first instinct back when it all started. When you hear a child letting loose you assume the parents are allowing things to wear themselves down. But it went on and on. I started hating this pretty little girl for no reason other than not being able to explain to myself what the heck was going *on*. At church we would ask, How are the kids? Is everything okay? Can we help with anything? I'll be the nosy guy on Sunday if I think it could help. The girl was playing out front when I went to get Justine's diaper tote. From behind a bush she said, Hello? in this little voice. I didn't want to look at her. I couldn't. It absolutely broke my heart. I cannot even say why except that I heard terror in it. It seemed surrounded by this mysterious, oppressive sadness. Why did she cry like that? I want to know. What caused that anguish in such a young person? I've heard a lot of despairing sounds since the machine came, seen a lot of broken children in the shelter. Nothing like her. Maybe I do not want to

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know. I am glad I am no longer her neighbor.

*Anonymous, now of Portland, Maine*

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My oldest girl Corina showed me footage on her tablet. I watched over the video repeatedly in the hotel bed with Ben until we had to wake up Corina to ask where the charging cable was. To see Jillian there speechless in her dress. Each time I somehow know in my body that she will be killed. My stomach turns, then loosens like I am going to be sick. But it is important to see exactly what my husband went through. I press play again knowing exactly where the time bar will be on the bottom of the video when the top corner of the machine comes into view over the pines in our front yard. I know exactly when Jillian turns, all by herself, and marches unafraid across the grass to Ben and Corina. They get into the car, and I watch along like I am sitting in Corina's hands. I cannot believe the girls can even sleep at night. Ben and I are zombies with this feeling like, have you ever come racing up to an intersection and suddenly panicked because you *know* you are about to hit someone? That is the feeling of seeing the machine on Corina's video. Predicted isn't the right word, or even feared, or even contemplated. It confirmed a thing I have felt in my bones, but never thought about. I knew someday they would be in mortal danger and they would all know what to do. So the panic is mixed with joy and trust and all kinds of stuff happening in my thoughts at once. Ben cries when he tries to tell them. He tells them what they experienced, though they don't understand. He understands, and he doesn't. I am here for him and the girls, with these waves of panic like it's all happening again to me for the first time.

*Angela Deutsch, homemaker*

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Are you asking me who I am? Or are you asking me to justify who I am? Those are opposite questions, sir. I was on the boulevard living my life. The sky was a diorama of clouds and the street a cloud of dioramas. *Blamo*. But this ain't no judgment. Why? Do you *feel guilty*?

*Theodore Smokefoot, that's who*

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Sobriety for me is one of those things that only lasts so long, like a job, though I didn't need a reason. The last case of beer in my mom's basement had my name written all over it. By the other side of the marsh I was wishing it was a fifth, or a covert mission. I sat in the old foundations of the timber pier and looked out over the reeds to those new condos lined up on the hill, a sight in the sunshine. Just as I got to thinking I would never live in one of those unless I finally got my act together, just as I was thinking it would take 100,000 years for scientists to find my body preserved under the muck, just as I realized I was not going to drive myself to Trish's and would have to sleep it off in my car, the machine came into view. I agree it looked like a big hanger or something cheap like a school. I've seen the world's largest, meanest machines in action, and this trumped them all. Down went the power lines and trees. Down went the condos. Up went the dust. Up went my dreams, and anger. I dove into the marsh and grabbed onto one of the pylons. It was the lifesaving choice to make. The water just vaporized around me in this ice-cold flash. When I cleared my face of mud, and after the cuts on my forehead had stopped bleeding, I opened my eyes. If my detachment had tried to bomb the world out of existence how they used to do, that is what. I got angrier holding on to that pylon and not doing anything. I can still feel it along the length of my body, in the grip of my arms. I'll never let it go. It will keep me from reaching for other comforts. That is all I have to say. Except my condolences go out to all those who lost loved ones or homes on that

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day. And I wish I could have done something.

*United States Air Force, retired*

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From a distance we could see the shadow cast over town like a thunderhead. It was too dark to see through and crazy with bits of everything. And they say the whole town got sucked up, but drive in now and see where bulldozers cleared the way. We had just taken a buck on the ridge. It began to snow garbage.

*Noel and Nathan*

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It seems to be getting late lately, would you not agree? Horrible though it is to contemplate how adding more thoughts to the fray of thoughts takes even more precious seconds off the clock, they need telling. *Need telling?* you will ask yourself, what needs telling now that our lives are ruined? *Truth needs telling*, brothers and sisters. It deserves to be heard; words cry out for an ear, two ears, a city of ears; and who to listen in the ruins of a school, the crumbs of a church? A factory's deep foundation has enough to say about men and women pressing on old hopes day after day let alone to hear how its town was dismantled by some mind-forged machine, plucked brick-by-bolt from under maples and sycamores themselves robbed of their lovely shade-making. Yes. Someone must listen to our cries with care. Say Yes with me. Someone must take up our breath into His hands and form it into an eternal pause. Yes. And who is this? you might ask. He who cannot help but listen. What are you asking Him? That is the question to ask yourself. What are you asking yourself? Are you listening? What do you hear? The rumblings leading to a fully prepared soul into which the one true word may come and burn away all the accumulations of this world? Build a nest with fresh materials for a new brood. Erase your suffering.

We cannot erase your suffering. You can, only you can by opening up your mind to the closed nature of your sins in the glory of His light and His forgiveness. Is that what you are being told? Does it hurt to hear it? *This*, children, the destruction everywhere around us is a message, even though His voice in this matter is truly, as it were, silent.

*Submitted recording*

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Whatever happened, it happened, and we need to get that settled in our hearts as soon as possible. Our minds will follow our hands as they take up new jobs and new burdens in new towns all around the country. We should not be ashamed to accept kind gifts of our neighbors, whoever now, or the government. This is part of what both are for. And we join in with our contributions of aid as we can with each new town succumbing to this thing we do not understand. Understanding will come with time, and if it does not, life will go on anyway. Life goes on because it has to, as my parents had it. They were right, and they go on in my heart because they have to do so, and because I need them there, right at my center where they can do so much good and be so beautiful. I work at a lumberyard in Kansas City while the pennies add up and my heart settles. It had been years since I worked physically, and I am glad someone would have me at all. I'm proud to be feeling stronger, and glad for the company. A woman here who lost her husband in a hurricane has been the ultimate consolation to me. We can talk about how things go on, because they have to, and not have to feel naive for being accepting of that pale gift and its blind momentum.

*Charlie Comstock*

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Neither of us could sleep. We had been working too long cleaning up. And some of the things we saw were too much to close out. A plane went overhead, but not a commercial plane and not an army plane. So the argument was about why postal planes never seem to crash. Neither of us argued it didn't happen. We figured it was not considered newsworthy. Talk turned from two pilots in a cockpit to a few people in a newsroom trying to determine what would interest and/or excite and/or terrify. Mail does not register on the sexiness scale. And he said there was an aspect of fairness to it. Why cover a cargo plane, say, and not automobile accidents? There are too many of those, I said, and they're not freakish in any way. But what about some waitress who cuts her hand off in an IHOP in Denver? In Denver, I supposed, that would be news, for a moment anyway. Only if she had been suspected of doing it for a disability check or lawsuit, or actually had some disease that got to all the customers would it really be a great *story*. How the hell would she cut her whole hand off anyway? I asked. He did not know how she would accomplish that in an IHOP. Badly scalded, he said. What if she badly scalded her hand? Well that is just self-evidently not newsworthy.

*Bo*

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My dear sweet brother said, You're not going to win this one, Eva. You are messing with the wrong magician. But he is dumb. I love him but he is dumb. For example, he thought that was the end of it. Like just by saying you can't do anything about anything changed anything for me. It ruined him. You only have to look at him to see that. His ideas are interchangeably bad. I found a house and I carried the water and I kept the matches dry until the aid was allowed inside the perimeter. The whole time he was all, I don't know what the griping is about. Who didn't wish the town would get swallowed up by hell? Just a good housecleaning if you ask me, though of course no one did ask

him. I said, it took the end of the world to get you out of mom and dad's house after 37 years. *That's* the real housecleaning. Now I am the magician, and if he messes with me, he can be damn sure it's with the wrong one. I am feeding people. I know how to do that. He can clean and watch the kids we have taken in. Together, we might make a pretty good team when this is all over with. And he is lost without my parents.

*Unidentified minor*

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I survived the school being destroyed. Not many people did. I survived the surviving. I waited until dark for someone to come, but no one did come. When I got cold I started walking, thinking I could find something, or someone, or at least reception for my phone. I did not find any of those until I got to the county highway. A bunch of people were standing around the front yard. She had food warmed up for everyone. People took turns helping and eating. It was a bad kind of quiet all throughout the house except for kids trying to call people on her phone. And the adults consoling them. One boy knew his telephone number and address, but neither of those things existed anymore. What was someone supposed to do with him? We laid him down with the other kids and some adults and read to them. Finally, I got my mom on the phone in Houston. She had seen it on the news and would not let me hang up until I was asleep. I said there was a whole line of people waiting behind me. She did not care, and I was forced to hang up on her crying into the phone. I could not sleep after that. I wanted badly to help the woman clean up, but I was not taken seriously, so I went to that boy, and found him awake, and read to him until morning, something about horses.

*Unidentified minor*

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