

# The Overloaded Man

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Faulkner was slowly going insane.

After breakfast he waited impatiently in the lounge while his wife tidied up in the kitchen. She would be gone within two or three minutes, but for some reason he always found the short wait each morning almost unbearable. As he drew the Venetian blinds and readied the reclining chair on the veranda he listened to Julia moving about efficiently. In the same strict sequence she stacked the cups and plates in the dishwasher, slid the pot roast for that evening's dinner into the auto-cooker and selected the alarm, lowered the air-conditioner, refrigerator and immersion heater settings, switched open the oil storage manifolds for the delivery tanker that afternoon, and retracted her section of the garage door.

Faulkner followed the sequence with admiration, counting off each successive step as the dials clicked and snapped.

You ought to be in B-52's, he thought, or in the control house of a petrochemicals plant. In fact Julia worked in the personnel section at the Clinic, and no doubt spent all day in the same whirl of efficiency, stabbing buttons marked *Jones*, *Smith*, and *Brown*, shunting paraplegics to the left, paranoids to the right.

She stepped into the lounge and came over to him, the standard executive product in brisk black suit and white blouse.

„Aren't you going to the school today?“ she asked.

Faulkner shook his head, played with some papers on the desk. „No, I'm still on creative reflection. Just for this week. Professor Harman thought I'd been taking too many classes and getting stale.“

She nodded, looking at him doubtfully. For three weeks now he had been lying around at home, dozing on the veranda, and she was beginning to get suspicious. Sooner or later, Faulkner realized, she would find out, but by then he hoped to be out of reach. He longed to tell her the truth, that two months ago he had resigned from his job as a lecturer at the Business School and had no intention of ever going back. She'd get a damn big surprise when she discovered they had almost expended his last pay cheque, might even have to put up with only one car. Let her work, he thought, she earns more than I did anyway.

With an effort Faulkner smiled at her. Get out! his mind screamed, but she still hovered around him indecisively.

„What about your lunch? There's no—“

„Don't worry about me,“ Faulkner cut in quickly, watching the clock. „I gave up eating six months ago. You have lunch at the Clinic.“

Even talking to her had become an effort. He wished they could communicate by means of notes; had even bought two scribble pads for this purpose. However, he had never quite been able to suggest that she use hers, although he did leave messages around for her, on the pretext that his mind was so intellectually engaged that talking would break up his thought trains.

Oddly enough, the idea of leaving her never seriously occurred to him. Such an escape would prove nothing. Besides, he had an alternative plan.

„You'll be all right?“ she asked, still watching him warily.

„Absolutely,“ Faulkner told her, maintaining the smile. It felt like a full day's work.

Her kiss was quick and functional, like the automatic peck of some huge bottle-topping machine. The smile was still on his face as she reached the door. When she had gone he let it fade slowly, then found himself breathing again and gradually relaxed, letting the tension drain down through his arms and legs. For a few minutes he wandered blankly around the empty house, then made his way into the lounge again, ready to begin his serious work.

His programme usually followed the same course. First, from the centre drawer of his desk he took a small alarm clock, fitted with a battery and wrist strap. Sitting down on the veranda, he fastened the strap to his wrist, wound and set the clock and placed it on the table next to him, binding his arm to the chair so that there was no danger of dragging the clock onto the floor.

Ready now, he lay back and surveyed the scene in front of him.

Menninger Village, or the „Bin“ as it was known locally, had been built about ten years earlier as a self-contained housing unit for the graduate staff of the Clinic and their families. In all there were some sixty houses in the development, each designed to fit into a particular architectonic niche, preserving its own identity from within and at the same time merging into the organic unity of the whole development. The object of the architects, faced with the task of compressing a great number of small houses into a four-acre site, had been, firstly, to avoid producing a collection of identical hutches, as in most housing estates, and secondly, to provide a showpiece for a major psychiatric foundation which would serve as a model for the corporate living units of the future.

However, as everyone there had found out, living in the Bin was hell on earth. The architects had employed the so-called psycho-modular system—a basic L-design—and this meant that everything under-or overlapped everything else. The whole development was a sprawl of interlocking frosted glass, white rectangles and curves, at first glance exciting and abstract (Life magazine had done several glossy photographic treatments of the new „living trends“ suggested by the Village) but to the people within formless and visually exhausting. Most of the Clinic’s senior staff had soon taken off, and the Village was now rented to anyone who could be persuaded to live there.

Faulkner gazed out across the veranda, separating from the clutter of white geometric shapes the eight other houses he could see without moving his head. On his left, immediately adjacent, were the Penzils, with the McPhersons on the right; the other six houses were directly ahead, on the far side of a muddle of interlocking garden areas, abstract rat-runs divided by waist-high white panelling, glass angle-pieces and slatted screens.

In the Penzils’ garden was a collection of huge alphabet blocks, each three high, which their two children played with. Often they left messages out on the grass for Faulkner to read, sometimes obscene, at others merely gnostic and obscure. This morning’s came into the latter category. The blocks spelled out: STOP AND GO Speculating on the total significance of this statement, Faulkner let his mind relax, his eyes staring blankly at the houses. Gradually their already obscured outlines began to merge and fade, and the long balconies and ramps partly hidden by the intervening trees became disembodied forms, like gigantic geometric units.

Breathing slowly, Faulkner steadily closed his mind, then without any effort erased his awareness of the identity of the house opposite.

He was now looking at a cubist landscape, a collection of random white forms below a blue backdrop, across which several powdery green blurs moved slowly backwards and forwards. Idly, he wondered what these geometric forms really represented—he knew that only a few seconds earlier they had constituted an immediately familiar part of his everyday existence—but however he rearranged them spatially in his mind, or sought their associations, they still remained a random assembly of geometric forms.

He had discovered this talent only about three weeks ago. Balefully eyeing the silent television set in the lounge one Sunday morning, he had suddenly realized that he had so completely accepted and assimilated the physical form of the plastic cabinet that he could no longer remember its function. It had required a considerable mental effort to recover himself and re-identify it. Out of interest he

had tried out the new talent on other objects, found that it was particularly successful with over-associated ones such as washing machines, cars and other consumer goods. Stripped of their accretions of sales slogans and status imperatives, their real claim to reality was so tenuous that it needed little mental effort to obliterate them altogether.

The effect was similar to that of mescaline and other hallucinogens, under whose influence the dents in a cushion became as vivid as the craters of the moon, the folds in a curtain the ripples in the waves of eternity.

During the following weeks Faulkner had experimented carefully, training his ability to operate the cut-out switches. The process was slow, but gradually he found himself able to eliminate larger and larger groups of objects, the massproduced furniture in the lounge, the over-enamelled gadgets in the kitchen, his car in the garage—de-identified, it sat in the half-light like an enormous vegetable marrow, flaccid and gleaming; trying to identify it had driven him almost out of his mind. „What on earth could it possibly be?“ he had asked himself helplessly, splitting his sides with laughter—and as the facility developed he had dimly perceived that here was an escape route from the intolerable world in which he found himself at the Village.

He had described the facility to Ross Hendricks, who lived a few houses away, also a lecturer at the Business School and Faulkner's only close friend.

„I may actually be stepping out of time,“ Faulkner speculated. „Without a time sense consciousness is difficult to visualize. That is, eliminating the vector of time from the de-identified object frees it from all its everyday cognitive associations. Alternatively, I may have stumbled on a means of repressing the photo-associative centres that normally identify visual objects, in the same way that you can so listen to someone speaking your own language that none of the sounds has any meaning. Everyone's tried this at some time.“

Hendricks had nodded. „But don't make a career out of it, though.“ He eyed Faulkner carefully. „You can't simply turn a blind eye to the world. The subject-object relationship is not as polar as Descartes' *Cogito ergo sum* suggests. By any degree to which you devalue the external world so you devalue yourself. It seems to me that your real problem is to reverse the process.“

But Hendricks, however sympathetic, was beyond helping Faulkner. Besides, it was pleasant to see the world afresh again, to wallow in an endless panorama of brilliantly coloured images. What did it matter if there was form but no content?

A sharp click woke him abruptly. He sat up with a jolt, fumbling with the alarm clock, which had been set to wake him at 11 o'clock. Looking at it, he saw that it was only 10.55. The alarm had not rung, nor had he received a shock from the battery. Yet the click had been distinct. However, there were so many servos and robots around the house that it could have been anything.

A dark shape moved across the frosted glass panel which formed the side wall of the lounge. Through it, into the narrow drive separating his house from the Penzils', he saw a car draw to a halt and park, a young woman in a blue smock climb out and walk across the gravel. This was Penzil's sister-in-law, a girl of about twenty who had been staying with them for a couple of months. As she disappeared into the house Faulkner quickly unstrapped his wrist and stood up.

Opening the veranda doors, he sauntered down into the garden, glancing back over his shoulder.

The girl, Louise (he had never spoken to her), went to sculpture classes in the morning, and on her return regularly took a leisurely shower before going out onto the roof to sunbathe.

Faulkner hung around the bottom of the garden, flipping stones into the pond and pretending to straighten some of the pergola slats, then noticed that the McPhersons' 15-year-old son Harvey was approaching along the other garden.

„Why aren't you at school?“ he asked Harvey, a gangling youth with an intelligent ferretlike face under a mop of brown hair.

„I should be,“ Harvey told him easily. „But I convinced Mother I was overtense, and Morrison“—his father—„said I was ratiocinating too much.“ He shrugged. „Patients here are overpermissive.“

„For once you're right,“ Faulkner agreed, watching the shower stall over his shoulder. A pink form moved about, adjusting taps, and there was the sound of water jetting.

„Tell me, Mr Faulkner,“ Harvey asked. „Do you realize that since the death of Einstein in 1955 there hasn't been a single living genius? From Michelangelo, through Shakespeare, Newton, Beethoven, Goethe, Darwin, Freud and Einstein there's always been a living genius. Now for the first time in 500 years we're on our own.“

Faulkner nodded, his eyes engaged. „I know,“ he said. „I feel damned lonely about it too.“

When the shower was over he grunted to Harvey, wandered back to the veranda, and took up his position again in the chair, the battery lead strapped to his wrist.

Steadily, object by object, he began to switch off the world around him. The houses opposite went first. The white masses of the roofs and balconies he resolved quickly into flat rectangles, the lines of windows into small squares of colour like the grids in a Mondrian abstract. The sky was a blank field of blue. In the distance an aircraft moved across it, engines hammering. Carefully Faulkner repressed the identity of the image, then watched the slim silver dart move slowly away like a vanishing fragment from a cartoon dream.

As he waited for the engines to fade he was conscious of the sourceless click he had heard earlier that morning. It sounded only a few feet away, near the French window on his right, but he was too immersed in the unfolding kaleidoscope to rouse himself.

When the plane had gone he turned his attention to the garden, quickly blotted out the white fencing, the fake pergola, the elliptical disc of the ornamental pool. The pathway reached out to encircle the pool, and when he blanked out his memories of the countless times he had wandered up and down its length it reared up into the air like a terracotta arm holding an enormous silver jewel.

Satisfied that he had obliterated the Village and the garden, Faulkner then began to demolish the house. Here the objects around him were more familiar, highly personalized extensions of himself. He began with the veranda furniture, transforming the tubular chairs and glass-topped table into a trio of involuted green coils, then swung his head slightly and selected the TV set inside the lounge on his right. It clung limply to its identity. Easily he unfocused his mind and

reduced the brown plastic box, with its fake wooden veining, to an amorphous blur.

One by one he cleared the bookcase and desk of all associations, the standard lamps and picture frames. Like lumber in some psychological warehouse, they were suspended behind him in vacuo, the white armchairs and sofas like blunted rectangular clouds.

Anchored to reality only by the alarm mechanism clamped to his wrist, Faulkner craned his head from left to right, systematically obliterating all traces of meaning from the world around him, reducing everything to its formal visual values.

Gradually these too began to lose their meaning, the abstract masses of colour dissolving, drawing Faulkner after them into a world of pure psychic sensation, where blocks of ideation hung like magnetic fields in a cloud chamber. With a shattering blast, the alarm rang out, the battery driving sharp spurs of pain into Faulkner's forearm. Scalp tingling, he pulled himself back into reality and clawed away the wrist strap, massaging his arm rapidly, then slapped off the alarm.

or a few minutes he sat kneading his wrist, re-identifying all the objects around him, the houses opposite, the gardens, his home, aware that a glass wall had been inserted between them and his own psyche. However carefully he focused his mind on the world outside, a screen still separated them, its opacity thickening imperceptibly.

On other levels as well, bulkheads were shifting into place.

His wife reached home at 6.00, tired out after a busy intake day, annoyed to find Faulkner ambling about in a semistupor, the veranda littered with dirty glasses.

„Well, clean it up!“ she snapped when Faulkner vacated his chair for her and prepared to take off upstairs. „Don't leave the place like this. What's the matter with you? Come on, connect!“

Cramming a handful of glasses together, Faulkner mumbled to himself and started for the kitchen, found Julia blocking the way out when he tried to leave. Something was on her mind. She sipped quickly at her martini, then began to throw out probes about the school. He assumed she had rung there on some pretext and had found her suspicions reinforced when she referred in passing to himself.

„Liaison is terrible,“ Faulkner told her. „Take two days off and no one remembers you work there.“ By a massive effort of concentration he had managed to avoid looking his wife in the face since she arrived. In fact, they had not exchanged a direct glance for over a week. Hopefully he wondered if this might be getting her down.

Supper was slow agony. The smells of the auto-cooked pot roast had permeated the house all afternoon. Unable to eat more than a few mouthfuls, he had nothing on which to focus his attention. Luckily Julia had a brisk appetite and he could stare at the top of her head as she ate, let his eyes wander around the room when she looked up.

After supper, thankfully, there was television. Dusk blanked out the other houses in the Village, and they sat in the darkness around the set, Julia grumbling at the programmes.

„Why do we watch every night?“ she asked. „It’s a total time waster.“

Faulkner gestured airily. „It’s an interesting social document.“ Slumped down into the wing chair, hands apparently behind his neck, he could press his fingers into his ears, at will blot out the sounds of the programme. „Don’t pay any attention to what they’re saying,“ he told his wife. „It makes more sense.“ He watched the characters mouthing silently like demented fish. The close-ups in melodramas were particularly hilarious; the more intense the situation the broader was the farce.

Something kicked his knee sharply. He looked up to see his wife bending over him, eyebrows knotted together, mouth working furiously. Fingers still pressed to his ears, Faulkner examined her face with detachment, for a moment speculated whether to complete the process and switch-her off as he had switched off the rest of the world earlier that day. When he did he wouldn’t bother to set the alarm „Harry!“ he heard his wife bellow.

He sat up with a start, the row from the set backing up his wife’s voice.

„What’s the matter? I was asleep.“

„You were in a trance, you mean. For God’s sake answer when I talk to you. I was saying that I saw Harriet Tizzard this afternoon.“ Faulkner groaned and his wife swerved on him. „I know you can’t stand the Tizzards but I’ve decided we ought to see more of them...“

As his wife rattled on, Faulkner eased himself down behind the wings. When she was settled back in her chair he moved his hands up behind his neck. After a few discretionary grunts, he slid his fingers into his ears and blotted out her voice, then lay quietly watching the silent screen.

By 10 o’clock the next morning he was out on the veranda again, alarm strapped to his wrist. For the next hour he lay back enjoying the disembodied forms suspended around him, his mind free of its anxieties. When the alarm woke him at 11.00 he felt refreshed and relaxed. For a few moments he was able to survey the nearby houses with the visual curiosity their architects had intended. Gradually, however, everything began to secrete its poison again, its overlay of nagging associations, and within ten minutes he was looking fretfully at his wristwatch.

When Louise Penzil’s car pulled into the drive he disconnected the alarm and sauntered out into the garden, head down to shut out as many of the surrounding houses as possible. As he was idling around the pergola, replacing the slats torn loose by the roses, Harvey McPherson suddenly popped his head over the fence.

„Harvey, are you still around? Don’t you ever go to school?“

„Well, I’m on this relaxation course of Mother’s,“ Harvey explained. „I find the competitive context of the classroom is—“

„I’m trying to relax too,“ Faulkner cut in. „Let’s leave it at that. Why don’t you beat it?“

Unruffled, Harvey pressed on. „Mr Faulkner, I’ve got a sort of problem in metaphysics that’s been bothering me. Maybe you could help. The only absolute in space-time is supposed to be the speed of light. But as a matter of fact any estimate of the speed of light involves the component of time, which is subjectively variable—so, barn, what’s left?“

„Girls,“ Faulkner said. He glanced over his shoulder at the Penzil house and then turned back moodily to Harvey.

Harvey frowned, trying to straighten his hair. „What are you talking about?“

„Girls,“ Faulkner repeated. „You know, the weaker sex, the distaff side.“

„Oh, for Pete’s sake.“ Shaking his head, Harvey walked back to his house, muttering to himself.

That’ll shut you up, Faulkner thought. He started to scan the Penzils’ house through the slats of the pergola, then suddenly spotted Harry Penzil standing in the centre of his veranda window, frowning out at him.

Quickly Faulkner turned his back and pretended to trim the roses. By the time he managed to work his way indoors he was sweating heavily. Harry Penzil was the sort of man liable to straddle fences and come out leading with a right swing.

Mixing himself a drink in the kitchen, Faulkner brought it out onto the veranda and sat down waiting for his embarrassment to subside before setting the alarm mechanism.

He was listening carefully for any sounds from the Penzils’ when he heard a familiar soft metallic click from the house on his right.

Faulkner sat forward, examining the veranda wall. This was a slab of heavy frosted glass, completely opaque, carrying white roof timbers, clipped onto which were slabs of corrugated polythene sheeting. Just beyond the veranda, screening the proximal portions of the adjacent gardens, was a ten-foot-high metal lattice extending about twenty feet down the garden fence and strung with japonica.

Inspecting the lattice carefully, Faulkner suddenly noticed the outline of a square black object on a slender tripod propped up behind the first vertical support just three feet from the open veranda window, the disc of a small glass eye staring at him unblinkingly through one of the horizontal slots.

A camera! Faulkner leapt out of his chair, gaping incredulously at the instrument. For days it had been clicking away at him. God alone knew what glimpses into his private life Harvey had recorded for his own amusement.

Anger boiling, Faulkner strode across to the lattice, prised one of the metal members off the support beam and seized the camera. As he dragged it through the space the tripod fell away with a clatter and he heard someone on the McPhersons’ veranda start up out of a chair.

Faulkner wrestled the camera through, snapping off the remote control cord attached to the shutter lever. Opening the camera, he ripped out the film, then put it down on the floor and stamped its face in with the heel of his shoe. Then, ramming the pieces together, he stepped forward and hurled them over the fence towards the far end of the McPhersons’ garden.

As he returned to finish his drink the phone rang in the hall.

„Yes, what is it?“ he snapped into the receiver.

„Is that you, Harry? Julia here.“

„Who?“ Faulkner said, not thinking. „Oh, yes. Well, how are things?“

„Not too good, by the sound of it.“ His wife’s voice had become harder. „I’ve just had a long talk with Professor Harman. He told me that you resigned from the school two months ago. Harry, what are you playing at? I can hardly believe it.“

„I can hardly believe it either,“ Faulkner retorted jocularly. „It’s the best news I’ve had for years. Thanks for confirming it.“

„Harry!“ His wife was shouting now. „Pull yourself together! If you think I’m going to support you you’re very much mistaken. Professor Harman said—“

„That idiot Harman!“ Faulkner interrupted. „Don’t you realize he was trying to drive me insane?“ As his wife’s voice rose to an hysterical squawk he held the receiver away from him, then quietly replaced it in the cradle. After a pause he took it off again and laid it down on the stack of directories.

Outside, the spring morning hung over the Village like a curtain of silence. Here and there a tree stirred in the warm air, or a window opened and caught the sunlight, but otherwise the quiet and stillness were unbroken.

Lying on the veranda, the alarm mechanism discarded on the floor below his chair, Faulkner sank deeper and deeper into his private reverie, into the demolished world of form and colour which hung motionlessly around him. The houses opposite had vanished, their places taken by long white rectangular bands. The garden was a green ramp at the end of which poised the silver ellipse of the pond. The veranda was a transparent cube, in the centre of which he felt himself suspended like an image floating on a sea of ideation. He had obliterated not only the world around him, but his own body, and his limbs and trunk seemed an extension of his mind, disembodied forms whose physical dimensions pressed upon it like a dream’s awareness of its own identity.

Some hours later, as he rotated slowly through his reverie, he was aware of a sudden intrusion into his field of vision. Focusing his eyes, with surprise he saw the dark-suited figure of his wife standing in front of him, shouting angrily and gesturing with her handbag.

For a few minutes Faulkner examined the discrete entity she familiarly presented, the proportions of her legs and arms, the planes of her face. Then, without moving, he began to dismantle her mentally, obliterating her literally limb by limb. First he forgot her hands, forever snapping and twisting like frenzied birds, then her arms and shoulders, erasing all his memories of their energy and motion. Finally, as it pressed closer to him, mouth working wildly, he forgot her face, so that it presented nothing more than a blunted wedge of pink-grey dough, deformed by various ridges and grooves, split by apertures that opened and closed like the vents of some curious bellows.

Turning back to the silent dreamscape, he was aware of her jostling insistently behind him. Her presence seemed ugly and formless, a bundle of obtrusive angles.

Then at last they came into brief physical contact. Gesturing her away, he felt her fasten like a dog upon his arm. He tried to shake her off but she clung to him, jerking about in an outpouring of anger.

Her rhythms were sharp and ungainly. To begin with he tried to ignore them; then he began to restrain and smooth her, moulding her angular form into a softer and rounder one.

As he worked away, kneading her like a sculptor shaping clay, he noticed a series of crackling noises, over which a persistent scream was just barely audible. When he finished he let her fall to the floor, a softly squeaking lump of spongy rubber.

Faulkner returned to his reverie, re-assimilating the unaltered landscape. His brush with his wife had reminded him of the one encumbrance that still remained—his own body. Although he had forgotten its identity it none the less

felt heavy and warm, vaguely uncomfortable, like a badly made bed to a restless sleeper. What he sought was pure ideation, the undisturbed sensation of psychic being untransmuted by any physical medium. Only thus could he escape the nausea of the external world.

Somewhere in his mind an idea suggested itself. Rising from his chair, he walked out across the veranda, unaware of the physical movements involved, but propelling himself towards the far end of the garden.

Hidden by the rose pergola, he stood for five minutes at the edge of the pond, then stepped into the water. Trousers billowing around his knees, he waded out slowly. When he reached the centre he sat down, pushing the weeds apart, and lay back in the shallow water.

Slowly he felt the puttylike mass of his body dissolving, its temperature growing cooler and less oppressive. Looking out through the surface of the water six inches above his face, he watched the blue disc of the sky, cloudless and undisturbed, expanding to fill his consciousness. At last he had found the perfect background, the only possible field of ideation, an absolute continuum of existence uncontaminated by material excrescences.

Steadily watching it, he waited for the world to dissolve and set him free.

