

# Nuclear Man

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He was the talk of the town. With the carnival only days away from its annual stopover on the distended, Astro-Turfed surface of central park, the papers and TV news programs buzzed with rumors about the famous "Nuclear Man." He was the main attraction, and the posters proclaiming the usual sights and sensations of the carnival did so only in the small print. A good three fourths of the page was devoted to the praises of the "modern marvel," "son of the atom," and "true wonder of the world."

Naturally, scientists up and down and all across the nation swore up and down and sideways that there could be no such thing as a human being containing the essence of a nuclear device. Some of them dismissed it out of hand and altogether, while others postulated that it might be possible for certain genetic mutations to lend the skin a particular, weak glow that, when run through the publicity machine, could be misconstrued as nuclear. Some people wondered whether the police or government shouldn't do something to contain the man. 9-1-1 calls were made in protest of the carnival's proximity to the residences of the country's hard working, tax paying citizens.

"If the terrorists got hold of that fellow," exclaimed a caller on a talk radio show, "they'd blow the shit outta us 'fore you could turn around twice!"

Statements were issued, in conjunction with the many scientific disclaimers, to encourage calm. If the panic subsided, the shiver of anticipation only intensified. Everyone, even the doomsday theorists and worrywarts, were eager to see the

Nuclear Man for a measly thirteen dollars (in addition to the carnivals typical, general admittance fee of \$13.95).

Euphrates Cain, grunt typist and wearer of secondhand shoes, regarded the media blitz with an interest that was nearly stifled by doubt, or by a pervasive sense of ennui. The idea of a Nuclear Man spoke to the increasingly narcissistic worldview of the masses. Having had their fill of God-in-human-form, they had turned to a mythological figure of biotechnology to inspire their missing fervor. The heat of this desire warmed even Euphrates Cain as he paused with the others on the street, stopped in transit by the tantalizing red and blue and gaunt, bold-face type of the carnival posters.

Mankind's future... today!

Plus popcorn, soda, and bratwurst with onion.

Even though it was summer and hot, there was talk of snow on the streets. Euphrates Cain heard some of it on his way home from the office.

"They claim," said a woman, "that it may snow."

"Really? Snow. And after all that talk of planetary warming too."

"Actually, it's a common mistake people make in assuming that the warming process produces only blistering weather and skin cancer. It screws up the weather patterns on a massive scale, destabilizing everything and dropping snow on one unlikely part of the world even as it ruins crops and bakes the soil to a crisp somewhere else."

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The bedside phone rang at 2 a.m. Euphrates Cain answered on the fifth ring and groggily lifted the earpiece so that it rested, insecurely, beside his head.

“Hello,” he said.

“Hello,” replied what he instantly recognized as a pre-recorded message.

“Greetings, Eustace Kind,” sang the faux femme voice box of the auto-dialer. “We are calling today to ask you about your participation as a voter in the upcoming presidential election. This November, Ronald Gorsman desperately needs your vote...”

Too tired to hang up, Euphrates Cain lay in bed and let the disinterested voice drone into his ear about the “necessity of the republic,” “international peace initiatives,” and “the despondent state of the national jobs market.” When the message finally wished him “good day” and ceased its incessant hum, Cain took the receiver in hand and returned it to its stand, where the red light that indicated the device was charging came on and seared itself into the backs of his eyeballs.

Euphrates Cain blinked and turned over on his back to stare at the ceiling. The after-image of the light followed the line of his gaze wherever he moved it—like a laser pointer in a lecture hall, or a hole in the ozone layer. When he squinted his eyes, the hallucination of the light became sharper and brightened. Euphrates Cain imagined it was a burning hole in his ceiling, flames licking at the edges waiting to give way and allow a gush of fire into the room that would descend like an inverted plume of roiling, ashy cloud to consume him where he lay.

He thought once again of the many people waiting downtown for the chance to buy their carnival tickets and assure themselves the chance of seeing something

extraordinary. He found himself wracked with guilt at his disbelief in the face of so much righteous conviction.

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He entered the tent cautiously, taking small and tentative steps as if he were a disobedient toddler breaking into his parents' room. A few other gawkers pressed in around him. The layer of litter on the straw floor suggested that a far larger group had come through earlier in the day. The discarded drink cups and grease-stained popcorn bags would be easy enough to remove, but a sprinkling of multi-colored candies and other foodstuffs that crunched or squished underfoot would be harder to extricate. It would take a meticulous worker to pick the place clean again.

Of course, it was very possible that the detritus had accumulated over several days and that the carnival staff had no intentions of cleaning up. Rather, at the end of the week, they'd simply sweep everything—straw and candy and trash—together and either bag it for the landfill or heap it all together and set fire to it as a macabre farewell to the hunched, soft-bellied men and their wheezing wives who packed the area when the carnival was in operation. The lean, jackal-faced carries stood at a distance and mocked the hot, effete, gaseous audiences while pocketing their money.

When his eyes had adjusted to the dim light of the darkened tent, Euphrates Cain looked to the Nuclear Man expecting a bristling mountain of masculinity emanating ripping waves of heat. What form aside from that of Adonis, Prometheus, or of other, equally legendary status, could possibly bear to contain the might of mankind's own bane? His mutually-assured, atomic destruction with the poisonous winds that were more insidious than the initial awe-inspiring burst and which carried the promise of death for miles afterward? What dread hand and what dread form?

Euphrates Cain stepped forward, right up against the dusty rope strung across the tent to cordon off a third of the space for the carnival's crown jewel to occupy. He had purposefully averted his gaze until then, when he felt he could look with suitable dramatic reverence upon the elusive form. When he looked, what he saw was a wizened little man with a bald head and spectacles, reading and softly glowing in a rickety wooden chair that seemed just as incapable of bearing the mythic figure as the man himself was of wearing his own title.

Yes, there was a light coming from the little man (seemingly oblivious to the crowd staring at him). Yes, he gave off a little heat as well. He also licked his tiny, caramel-colored fingers and turned the pages of his book. His spidery hands held a simple book of poetry. It was a thin chapbook, probably self-published, with no ISBN number and of no significance to anyone. Euphrates Cain felt the small crowd stir around him with quiet chatter and nudging elbows. They were delighted by the little man. How did he glow like that? They murmured amongst themselves. Did his penis glow as well? Did he have a glowing wife and children stashed somewhere?

Bullshit, thought Euphrates Cain, it was all bullshit and those fiber-thin cables they threaded into the branches of tiny, factory-produced Christmas trees that people with small apartments bought and dragged out every year. The plastic form could throb in multiple colors from its place in the corner. And just like a fake Christmas tree, the Nuclear Man was probably full of the same threads. That's why he was sitting too. He had lights stashed in his pockets, wires running up the backs of the chair legs to criss-cross his deflated little chest and slither up through his shirt sleeves. It was, at best, a poor facsimile; at worst, a hoax. A gross, bullshitted hoax.

In that moment, Euphrates Cain wanted to take a rock and cave in the great, dome skull of mankind. He strode from the tent in a fury; and when a roaming carnie

tried to guess his weight, he flipped the man off instead of just telling him to go to hell.

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He sat on a bench and fumed until the carnival began to close down for the night. Certain lights went off in particular booths—slowly, the rides ceased to spin, turn, twirl, and flash their mystifying signals in red and green. Revelers walked past Euphrates Cain without giving him a glance. He sat completely undisturbed, surrounded by the night, until the Nuclear Man silently joined him. The small man's presence was as unobtrusive as one might have guessed just by looking at him. He sat and swung his legs lightly beneath him, kicking up under the bench and then out, toes aimed at the dying carnival.

"Some show," said the Nuclear Man. He was bundled up in a thick coat and gloves. He claimed to have sensitive skin. "Even certain types of soap will wreak havoc with me. If my fingers swell, I won't be able to turn the pages of a book."

"Lick your fingers," said Euphrates Cain. Before, he was angry; now, he was simply dismissive. Why, he'd already decided, should the reality of a Nuclear Man be any different from the pervading human condition of artificiality that he bore witness to every single day of his life? He would indulge the charlatan his whimsical, childish kicking and supposed soap allergy while quietly nursing the embers of his own disappointment.

The Nuclear Man let out a leathery sort of laugh and grinned at Euphrates Cain.

"No spit," he said. "To eat I have to douse everything with water. It's a chore to swallow anything. I live on the leftover bratwurst buns. I daren't drink alcohol."

Euphrates Cain resisted the urge to snap at the fraud and continued to play along.

“Let me guess: You can’t drink alcohol because you’ve got the biological equivalent of a furnace in your belly? One sip and you’re afraid you’ll explode... or set something else on fire.”

“Yes, yes,” said the Nuclear Man. “You know what I’m talking about. Volatility is no joke. I remind me all too often of the vinegar and baking soda volcanoes the kids used to make in science classes. If you put the right things together in the wrong place, you can definitely mess up someone’s day.”

Euphrates Cain threw back his head and glared up at the sky. The stars were tiny fires burning beyond reach or reproach. Like a promise, they continued to hang over the world in silent observation of the planet’s aimless rolling and its freak snow storms. They hung there in the glacial shroud of the void and died out quietly, slowly resolving to leave man at last to his business.

“People seem convinced that you are who you say you are,” said Euphrates Cain. “They see you as some kind of promise of an ascendency that they continue to hope will come for them all one day. We’ve built a stolid cage of a society in which to dwell, and the only way out is up. On the wings of angels or the carnivorous updraft of a massive explosion. There’s hope enough in both salvation and destruction. And they seem to see both of those things in you.”

“Fire can bring renewal. If you burn away the decay clotting the surface, you can promote new growth from below. It’s just waiting there to thrive.”

“That’s assuming you have the fire at all.”

The two men looked at each other. The smaller of the two tugged his coat tighter around him. He opened his mouth and gestured for Euphrates Cain to look within, past the craggy stalactite and stalagmites of the teeth. Down in the throat, which clinched in a dry swallow as Euphrates Cain looked on, a steady glow appeared and began to redden and expand in ruddy defiance of everything he knew.

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Euphrates Cain was sitting at his desk, contemplating a stack of memos in his in-box, when he heard the news that the Nuclear Man was gone.

“Snuffed out,” said the man on the radio. During regular business hours, some innocuous looking guy with nothing special about him came into the tent with a gun and shot the gently glowing little man in the chest in the name of humanity.

The news item was followed by an advertisement for mint-flavored gum that was also supposed to be some sort of aphrodisiac. Cain looked out the window while he listened to the commercial. He watched the snowless skies while someone on the radio sang a jingle about bologna and two of his co-workers discussed their end-of-summer plans: a cruise experience for Jenny and her family; a camping expedition for Mike and his kids.

The entire situation was exactly what you’d expect from humanity.

Euphrates Cain knew what few people would ever suspect; he knew that the strange little man with the dry throat was the closest thing to a sign of hope for modernity that any of them could expect. He had been proof that there was still something genuine out there, where what was promised was also fulfilled.

He thought about how he had sat with the Nuclear Man in a brightly-lit restaurant where he passed for just another man. He bought the little man a

cheeseburger and a glass of water to wash it down with. In return, the other man told Euphrates Cain about the book of poems he was reading. It was a gift, he explained, from a professor in a college town. It was a book of poems about marriage that no one wanted to read.

“Have you ever been married?” asked the Nuclear Man.

“No,” replied Euphrates Cain. He didn’t read a lot of poetry either. He hadn’t voted in any election, local or national, in over a decade. He didn’t subscribe to any magazines, and he got his news from the radio.

These admissions seemed to charm the small man and he grinned brightly.

“Are you a man of ideals, Mr. Cain? Do you hope to enact social change with your resistance?”

“I’m just a man among many,” he said, “and I suppose I’m looking for something genuine. Anymore, it’s impossible to tell when what you’re seeing is propaganda. Everything is about playful subversion, and I’m looking for the real deal—if such a thing exists anymore.”

The Nuclear Man had been a victim of hype. He himself was without pretension, and it was the humility that made him so hard for Euphrates Cain to stomach at first. Initially, he thought it was another act. But the way that little chestnut figure had seemed all too willing to fold in on itself, occupy only as much space as was strictly necessary while asking nothing of anyone, was no more a threat to humanity than it was a lie.