

The FIRE Man

By

Brent Leibowitz

WHY I LIKE IT: *Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes... I like "The Fireman," by Brent Leibowitz, because I am rarely entertained by Science Fiction. While that may seem like a dick move, I only mean to say that as a compliment to how enjoyable this short story is.*

It's like if Cyberpunk 2077 didn't suck when it first came out – I don't need all the patches over two years to fix all the fuckery to enjoy it.

From what I gather, the Fireman is a part of a cadre of "robots" (probably the wrong word) designed and meant to destroy a head figure in the futuristic society that Leibowitz has created.

Even more so, it really is a story that fits into every video game player's fantasies. He's crafted a videogame into a short story. As simple as that may seem, "The Fireman" is sort of an RPG quest in which you know that, once you complete your objective, you can continue to read.

I think that one of greatest qualities of this story is that I would want to read more. I don't know the beginning, but I'd be curious, I started in the middle, and I'm fine with that, and I don't know the end, but I would be amenable to finding out how "The Fireman" frees himself.

The best of videogames have a shocking third act to always wait for and I would wait for this one ("would you kindly").

Fun story. Fun Read. I was pretty damned entertained.

Nice work.

QUALITY QUOTABLE (for the love of language...)

I arrive at my first spot of the night, a nightclub called Poison. I can hear the droning, repetitive bass from all the way outside. There isn't much escaping it these days. It's what all the people play from their hovercars as they barrel down streets, in every bar and club, it could practically be our national anthem if anyone truly cared about the country anymore.

The Fireman

If I could experience the sense of touch, I would feel the cool breeze of the encroaching winter lap at my skin. Instead, it becomes harder to walk down the abandoned alleyway as my metallic joints go stiff. Technology is not so advanced as to not fall victim to the power of the elements. I watch as the wind throws trash into the air. I snatch a piece of garbage like a bird would its prey and hold it in front of me. I put my hand underneath it, then snap my fingers. A spark emerges which turns into a flame on my newly acquired bounty. I hold the fire near my arms and legs as the stiffness fades. This is as close as I will ever get to knowing what warm is.

I put out my fleeting creation beneath my feet once it has served its purpose. Joints without full mobility could be, in some situations, the difference between life and death. There's a part of me that hopes I won't be in one of those situations tonight. There's another part of me that craves those situations, as a human in the desert would crave water. My lone journey through the alley nears its end as I see the bright lights of the main streets. There, I cannot walk amongst the shadows. I raise the hood of my jacket over my head. I make sure to not have my face disappear but rather be only slightly obscured. It is useful to be mysterious but deadly to be suspicious and the line between the two grows thinner by the day.

As I step out of the alley and into the street, my jacket reflects the bright reds, greens, and purples of shop signs and advertising screens. I walk down the street, occasionally looking over my shoulder to make sure I'm not being followed. I am not afraid, merely aware of my surroundings. The last time I felt fear was before my enhancements. Now the most comparable thing to it is the knowledge that I could fail a mission. But I would not fail this one.

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anthem if anyone truly cared about the country anymore. I couldn't blame them, there is a hypnotic quality to it. One that lures you in with its simplicity and warmth before smothering you. But I was not here to think about music nor to let my body move to it. I was here to meet an informant.

"Hey there," a raspy voice called to me, "Looking for something? Entrance is that way."

I turn my head to the voice's source and see a thin, older looking man leaning up against a wall right outside the club doors. He is dressed simply aside from the glowing baseball cap that tops his head. I can see the years on his face but his eyes shine with mischievous youth. Perhaps they are not his own. He raises his hand to his face and sucks on his thumb. Removing his thumb from his mouth, he exhales a puff of smoke. Cybernetic enhancements are getting more and more creative. This man had fused his vice to his very being. But what caught my eye was the tattoo on his hand. A circle with lines surrounding it, like a sun, with six dots inside the circle. A clear indicator that he was my man. We all had the mark somewhere. The Doc had trained him well.

"I was hoping you might give me some directions, actually." I responded.

He hits his thumb-vape and smoke suddenly surrounds us. "Don't worry, our privacy is secured. For a moment," he says, almost reassuringly. "They can't hear us outside of here."

"Do you have the intel?" I ask, cutting to the chase.

"Not very chatty I see", the man grumbles, "He'll be in the back room of Hologram Jewelers on Crow Street".

"Thank you sir", I say before turning to my new destination.

"Hey, if we ever meet again, just call me Man of Air ". He must have been wanting to say that this whole time. We all have codenames too. I guess we all think they are special.

The hypnotic bass of Club Poison slowly fades away as I make my way toward my objective. I look into the sky, trying to see the moon but the light pollution and smokestacks have, as always, obscured it from view. I regret even looking up when my eye catches a billboard. On it is a video of a

man dressed in blue armor, waving to a crowd. The video cuts to him in battle. His arm transforms, becoming a cannon. I watch as the soldier obliterates his foes. Then, I feel the one real emotion I know I still have left. Hatred. I know this man, this blue soldier. I know how he is wrongfully adored by an ignorant populace and falsely called a hero. He smiles from the billboard, taunting me. I think about meeting him, showing my power, erasing that smug smile of superiority. He would hear the hiss of gas, see the flickers of flame emerge from my wrists, and feel the burn slowly envelop him. I could practically hear the crackle of the fire and his screams as the corporate poster child of inorganic enhancements met his doom to my pure inferno.

Something inside forces me to come back to reality. I stare at that billboard for a few seconds more until the fantasy fades from my mind. What I was doing tonight would eventually bring me to my desired confrontation. I continued down the street, as the rage continued to simmer inside me. I was hoping that it would come of use tonight.

I arrive at Hologram Jewelers as midnight looms over the city. The holographic sign flickers above, casting me in sporadic blue light. Figuring my target would be inside, I move to knock on the door. When my fist connects, the door moves open ever so slightly. A jewelry store already unlocked at midnight is never a good sign. I slowly open the door the rest of the way and step cautiously inside. Right in the center of the room is a body, its white suit flecked with red. Most of the blood pooled around the head where a large gash appears to have been the source. This was the man I was supposed to meet up with, a fellow with the Weapons Brokers. A man in yellow gear steps into my view. He is wearing a red construction helmet on his head and wields a glowing neon pickaxe. I recognize the colors and weapons immediately. This guy runs with the Metron Gang.

“Yo! We got company!” the gang member cries out. 3 more men, with the same outfit and weapons emerge from the back room. What shit luck. They just so happened to hit the one jewelry where I was supposed to rendezvous at. I don’t have much time to sulk as the gang member who

spotted me runs straight at me with his pickaxe raised. Guess my rage would come of use tonight after all.

As the criminal swings, I sidestep the blow. His pickaxe lands straight into a light switch. Sparks fly from the impact and my instincts kick into gear. I snap my fingers directly underneath the sparks and a small explosion erupts. The flames catch my enemy's face and he cries out like a wounded animal. He falls backward into a case of gems with smoke peeling off his face. He won't be a problem anymore.

"What the hell was that?" asks one of his friends.

"Who cares, let's kill this bastard!" cries another thug. Two of them begin to make their way toward me. I needed to end this. And quickly. I roll my wrists until my hands flex backwards. The hoses quickly snake their way up my arms. The cybernetic enhancements in my wrists activate, opening up slits through where the nozzles of my flamethrowers emerge. I can feel my stomach working overtime, building up a flame to match my fury. My opponents stop short, confused by the sight in front of them.

"What's going on?" asks the same curious criminal as before.

"You don't know who I am, do you?" Is my answer. The gas hisses forth, almost as a warning sign, though the fools were too late to recognize it. Ribbons of red burst forth through me and wash over the two thugs. At first, both are too shocked to react. In a matter of seconds they fall, writhing and screaming as the fire saps away their flesh and their life. I turn my attention from their charred corpses to the last criminal standing. I see at once the fear and the recognition in his eyes.

"You're- you're the Fireman!" He exclaims, "One of those robots that's got superpowers!". The Doc had truly unlocked something with the concept. The combination of an inorganic body with a natural force made my kind especially dangerous. Dangerous enough that a little man would try to destroy us. All to preserve a world where we are only reliant on him and others who live by nothing but wire and steel. But with this plan, we would end him and take our rightful place in the hierarchy of the world.

“That I am” I respond, watching his skin turn pale, “And the fellow you killed had something I wanted. You wouldn’t happen to have it now, would you?”.

He doesn’t even need to answer as his eyes shoot down towards his feet. I slowly step toward him, deliberate in my menace. He remains paralyzed as I peer over the counter dividing us. There, I see a bag at his feet and inside it a glowing white cube. I reach into the bag and pick up my luminous quarry. My mission is nearly complete. I just can’t have any loose ends.

“Thank you” are the last words he hears as I unleash my inferno upon him. I proceed to treat the rest of the store to the flames as well. I knew the gang would have disabled the cameras so when the fire unit sifted through the wreckage in the early morning, they would only suspect a robbery gone wrong due to an electrical fire. The flames lap at my skin but I cannot feel their sting nor melt at their heat. Holding the glowing cube in one hand, I use the other to pull out a pager.

“Hello Doctor”, I say into the pager after making contact, “I have acquired the battery”.

“Very good,” his voice crackles through, “This shall power my machine quite nicely. Return to base at once. It is time to begin Operation EMP”.

“Yes Doctor, soon I will destroy that obnoxious-”

“You will be joined by the others in the mission as well” says The Doc. I feel a sting inside me at this. I had been told that killing him would be my task alone. Had he told the others that too? The thought quickly leaves my head. As long as he ends up dead. That is good enough for me. It has to be.

“Yes Doctor” I respond, though the words feel not of my own. I know now that despite my power, there is a part of me that is still programmed, still property. Maybe one day this power could rise up and destroy any and all life below it. No matter how smart that life was. No matter how much control that life believed itself to have. But today, I can only walk through the blazing sea I made with another mission at hand, living this perpetual videogame.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *There is no shortage of stories in the sci-fi genre that blend the barriers between artificial and humanity. From Blade Runner to Westworld, the question of whether robots can be just as human as you or I has been of interest to me for a very long time. But before I ever encountered these thought-provoking, seminal works of science fiction, my first real encounter with the intersection between machine and man was playing the Mega Man games as a child. In this game, I would adventure around as a robot with a human face, taking on other human-like robots with elemental powers. These adversaries, called the Robot Masters, always interested me the most. How could these beings, seemingly so much like the protagonist I am playing as, be cold enforcers of a mere human's evil plans? It wasn't until much later in life, upon encountering works like Blade Runner, that I would come to understand that these beings were forced into their roles and any supposed free will was part of a grander design.*

From this conclusion came the dark internal world of The Fireman's protagonist. He lives like Rick Deckard, always on a mission, but wishes to be a symbol of power and destruction like Roy Batty was. The world he exists in is tinged with shades of noir novels yet is awash in technology and misery that could only be found in worlds like that of George Orwell or Ray Bradbury. It is in this melting pot of high-concept sci-fi, dystopian fiction, and pulpy crime stories comes the story of an artificial killer who puts a whole new meaning to firepower: The Fireman.

AUTHOR BIO: Brent Leibowitz is an emerging writer whose works are infused with genre and involve topical popular culture, typically from a Jewish perspective. Brent is a graduate of The Theatre School at DePaul University's playwriting program, where he had several staged readings, and a former intern for Florida Studio Theatre, where he wrote for their On-Deck Sketch Comedy Team.