

ICY YOU... JUICY ME

by PAT CADIGAN

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The crazy man was dancing around the public telephones on the northeast corner of 45th and Broadway in Times Square. Across the street, by contrast, everything was uneventful. Yellow cabs appeared and disappeared; people materialized in the crosswalk and then vanished, which meant they were walking awfully fast. Darcy wondered where they had to go in such a hurry at 5:38 in the morning. Maybe they were just trying to get out of the vicinity of the crazy man performing his ritual morning boogie. He was a pretty talented dancer for a crazy guy. Some of the people crossing at the opposite corner seemed to be watching him, or at least taking a look as they hurried to work or wherever. It was hard to tell exactly what was going on sometimes, with the choppiness of the image progression. Even weather conditions could be hard to determine. Rain or snow was easy, but it wasn't always easy to see if it was cold or not, not even by the way the crazy guy was dressed. Especially that. Even the frequency of his appearances wasn't necessarily a key -- being crazy, he wouldn't always make the logical decision to stay inside when it was cold. Darcy didn't even know if he had any place to be inside. There wasn't a shopping cart full of worldly goods and chattels, but maybe he always parked it off-camera, or stashed it somewhere.

Darcy smiled to herself. Keeping tabs on a crazy guy -- yeah, just another day in the life of the forty-year-old agoraphobe. The thing was, he was obviously aware of the camera; you could tell the way he performed. He always faced the camera straight on, even though the camera itself was placed at an angle meant to give the longest view down the street. You could see all the way down to the south island in Times Square with all the big screens on it, just like you could see all the way in the other direction to the north island on the other camera. Good morning, midtown Manhattan.

Darcy leaned closer to the screen, watching people flash in and out of the crosswalk, lone pedestrians giving way to groups of three, sometimes four, buses moving in and out of the frame, and, in the other window, the crazy guy still dancing around the payphones while pedestrians gave him a wide berth. She tried to imagine herself in the crosswalk, caught on camera, looking nonchalant and unaware in a dark blue parka or ski jacket or -- what did they call them now? Anoraks, that was it. Herself in a dark blue anorak and white scarf, knit hat pulled down over her lank, colorless hair, hands stuffed in her pockets. On her way to... well, somewhere. All those people outside had some place they were on their way to. Even the crazy guy.

She wondered what he would have thought if he'd known she was watching him and thinking of him as the crazy guy. He would probably think that was a heavy case of the pot calling the kettle a very dark color. Depending, of course, on how crazy he was.

But the problem was that she wasn't crazy... technically. Agoraphobia was not a true psychosis. It did not qualify as R.D. Laing's sane response to an insane world. It was simply an unreasoning fear, specifically of the marketplace, in this instance.

But if the marketplace in question was Times Square at 45th and Broadway, then the diagnosis was a bit faulty. She had been watching this little piece of the world on Live Earthcam from her North London flat for, well, she wasn't sure how long. But what she was sure of was that she had absolutely no fear, unreasoning or otherwise, of Times Square, or at least what was visible of it going north and south from 45th and Broadway.

It was everything else between her and it that had her petrified.

She left the crazy guy and his phone booth dance on the monitor and swapped the other view of Times Square for BourboCam in New Orleans, even though she knew it would be a disappointment. The only thing you got at this time of the morning at the corner of Bourbon and St. Peter were frat boys giving up and going home after a long night of drinking. They all looked like frat boys, anyway. Plus, BourboCam didn't give you a continuous onscreen image -- every twenty seconds, the frame went black while the scene reloaded. She moved on.

O Street in Lincoln, Nebraska was still dark, although the view over Lincoln looking east showed her that dawn was not far away. GeekCam was dark. Badgrll's Office took forever to load, but it was too early to see anything. Weirdcam wasn't online yet. The kitchen on KitchenCam was tidy, except for a small scattering of beer cans on some white thing with the mysterious legend odwalla large on the side. It was also empty. Other than that, California was cluttered up, as usual, with Nerdman, and she just wasn't interested in Nerdman today. The LivingRoomCam, which she didn't care for in the first place, played one of those awful midi tunes.

It was raining on Lower Gardiner Street in Dublin. Cloudy in Tokyo--

She was about to click on New Zealand when the Times Square frame found its way to the top of the accumulated windows on her monitor. The crazy guy was standing directly in front of the camera with his hands on his hips; the only word Darcy could think of for his expression was provoked.

Someone using his telephones? No one there behind him now, but most likely that hadn't been the problem anyway. If someone ever actually dared to approach the telephones during the performance of the dance ritual, the crazy guy would simply take his dancing into overdrive and that would settle the matter.

Darcy watched, fascinated, as he stood perfectly still, staring directly into the cam. It was daylight now and she could see him more clearly than she ever had. He was just a guy, only one guy of millions of guys, fifteen or fifty in a dark watch-cap, guy-shaped in a dark jacket -- anorak -- and jeans. Either his face was dirty or he needed a shave. Or both. She leaned closer, wishing for better resolution.

For no particular reason, she decided that underneath the dirt, his beard was a paler shade of tomcat ginger. It would suit him, she thought; all those dark colors, the dirt. He needed some brightening up.

Her gaze started to wander to the list of webcam links on the right side of her screen when he reached up and knocked on whatever glass separated him from the web cam. The knocking gesture was exaggerated, like an overenthusiastic mime in slow motion.

To accommodate the choppiness of the image progression, she realized. He was adapting his movements to the frequency of the image reloading, so they would look smoother. No denying it now, he definitely knew that cam was there, and what it was doing, and how.

Still moving in that exaggerated way, he raised his index finger and shook it at the camera in a silent scold before pointing both thumbs at himself. Then, as if to make sure, he pointed both index fingers at the camera, and then both thumbs at himself again.

No mistake; he most certainly did know about the webcam. And he knew that somewhere, someone

was watching.

Well, of course he knew. The camera was probably in plain sight, like any other camera among the multitude of cameras in New York City. Every large city had them for traffic or police surveillance, and now, finally, for the entertainment of web surfers. Kremlin Cam -- beautiful view, but too distant for Darcy's taste, too impersonal. Likewise ParisCam, and the skyline of Lincoln, Nebraska, and a good many others. What could you watch from a panorama cam but a shifting pattern of grubby dots or out-of-focus lights? Sometimes not even that.

On the other hand, people's personal cams were just a bit too up-close for her. She had no desire to become closely acquainted with someone else's room, though she'd watch an office for a while if nothing else of interest was happening anywhere.

In the end, however, she always found herself returning to the Times Square street level cams and, thus, to the crazy guy who did his best to make sure she had something to watch.

If she had a better monitor and a better graphics card, she wondered, watching him as he stood in front of the camera, arms folded now, his head tilted down so that he glowered into the lens from under his eyebrows, would she be able to see him a whole lot better, enough to make it worth the expense? Or would she find out that the camera, never meant to produce a continuous, flowing motion picture, was little better than the surveillance cams they showed footage from on America's Dumbest Criminals, pixels the size of chiclets?

Making sure the crazy guy stayed visible on her desktop, she emailed The Spook.

The Spook was not what he called himself but how he was known universally among his online acquaintances, or at least the ones Darcy knew of. He might have been a real spook at some time, or maybe he was just one of those people who always seemed to find out things that escaped other people. He ran a quirky search engine called JuicyThis? dedicated to what he called I-ways less traveled. He also answered questions, but only if he thought the questions were geeky enough. This, she thought, would satisfy his urge to neep-neep-neep. Even better, there was a very good chance that she would be able to understand the answer. Hardware was something she seemed to comprehend better than software.

Hello, Roky: taken up webcamming in a big way. If I invest in better graphics and resolution, can I get better cam video?

She sent the email and then went into the kitchen to heat up some soup for an early lunch. As she left the room, she imagined that she could feel the crazy guy's stare on her back, which was very silly. Possibly even crazy.

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When she returned to her desk with a large mug of cream of mushroom soup, the crazy guy was waiting for her with a tall skinny guy wearing a black trench coat and carrying a briefcase. The crazy guy was pointing at the cam; the skinny guy was squinting up at it thoughtfully while the crazy guy told him something. The briefcase flashed from the skinny guy's right hand to his left and back again. Behind them, a fleet of yellow cabs went by, heading downtown.

"Hey, pal, if you want a cab, you better get one now, instead of talking with some crazy guy on the street," Darcy said, giggling a little as she spooned up some soup. Who says agoraphobia's no fun?

As if in response to what she had said, the skinny guy turned around and then ran for the curb, waving at the cabs. The crazy guy looked after him for a moment before he turned back to look accusingly into the lens again.

Maybe he thought it was a police surveillance camera, or private security. Could he have any idea that it was a webcam? Did he have any idea about the web? Were crazy guys aware of the Internet?

Were crazy guys aware of the Internet. She had to laugh at herself. Crazy guys had invented the Internet, conceptually, anyway. It had just taken a while for the reality to catch up with the theory. This guy had probably been performing for cameras for years. Chances were, he'd get bored eventually and move on to some other camera somewhere else. Then what would she do for entertainment? Hope for another crazy guy to come along, she supposed; otherwise, she might actually have to turn on the television again.

Maybe, she thought, she should try to find some other crazy guys, just to make sure she wasn't driven to anything too desperate. New York was full of webcams and crazy guys -- surely the two had connected up in other locations besides 45th and Broadway. But as she went to choose another link from the list on the right side of her desktop, the crazy guy began jumping up and down in a frenzy, which was not much in the way of frenzy but did look very bizarre, considering. He squatted and made large no motions with both arms like a baseball umpire. The message was clear: don't touch that dial. Which was completely ridiculous, of course. Maybe she had an unreasoning fear of the marketplace, and maybe she hadn't left her flat in something like two years, and maybe she just now thought webcams were the height of entertainment, but she wasn't so far gone that she believed any of the people caught in the webcam's gaze had any awareness of who was watching them. That was just plain crazy.

Of course it was... and he was a crazy guy, right?

Frowning, she pushed back from her desk and got up to take her empty mug back into the kitchen. She would use the time to wash the mug and the spoon as a screen break. Clean as you go was the unbreakable rule for the housebound. Let the washing-up accumulate in the sink, allow the clutter to get out of hand and you might end up as one of those pathetic minor headlines on the inside pages of the newspaper: Local recluse found dead amid twenty years of old magazines and pizza boxes. Being an agoraphobe was a lot more complicated than just never leaving the house, something most people couldn't begin to appreciate, Darcy thought, running the water in the sink.

And what about her crazy-guy friend on the webcam -- what might he be able to appreciate? Even if she wasn't technically crazy, would her little problem give them some sort of common ground for relating to each other?

So, you say you can't leave the house, eh? Bummer.

Well, not really. I never get caught in the rain, for one thing.

I always do. No choice.

Yeah, that makes sense. So what is it with you, a compulsion?

She stood at the sink in a trance, waiting for the next line in the imaginary conversation while she rinsed the mug over and over, but it wouldn't come. She simply couldn't imagine why he danced around payphones and played to surveillance cameras. Finally, she shut the water off and placed the cup in the dishrag, but she lingered at the counter, wiping her hands on a dishtowel and trying to think. If she couldn't even theorize why the crazy guy did those few unremarkable irrational things, she certainly

wouldn't be able to figure out how it was he seemed to be aware of the reactions of an observer--

Well, how else, stupid? Because somehow, he can see you.

Slowly, she turned around to look through the doorway of the kitchen into the living room. The monitor sat in profile to where she was now. She had placed it that way so that she could look up and quick-check whether she had left the oven on, or forgotten something on top of the stove. (Cooker, she nagged herself; how many more years will you live here before you remember they call it a cooker?)

The doorway to the bedroom, however, was behind where she sat at the desk. Had she ever walked around nude in front of the monitor when she'd been online? She came up blank, which made her pretty sure she must have done it a million times. And if he could see her--

Darcy looked down at herself and burst out laughing. So he saw her. At forty, she actually wasn't half bad -- Pilates had been invented for prisoners, even the virtual kind. But all that aside -- he was a crazy guy. Who knew what he saw, or what he thought he was seeing?

Maybe he only thought he was seeing her, period.

Tension Darcy had been unaware of drained out of her in a rush. Her shoulders dropped three inches as she sagged against the doorway, shaking her head and laughing a little. Insanity could be contagious. What did they call it when two people shared a delusion? Folie à deux. Could you catch it by accident? Maybe... if you had kind of a head start, say, with an unreasoning fear, unreasoning being the key word. Unreasoning as in irrational; irrational as in crazy. Q.E.D.

But not quite. Enough to be fooled briefly -- and briefly was the key word there, thank you -- but not so crazy that it would stick. Nothing that would make you take up ritual telephone dancing or trading signals with some hallucinating fool four thousand miles away in another time zone. Crazy people weren't stupid. Most had normal intelligence, some of them were quite brilliant. Her crazy guy, for example, could well be brilliance combined with experience working in the field of surveillance, prior to his going over the edge into madness.

Sure. He might have been a security guard in one of those giant office buildings, paid to watch a whole wall of monitors. That wasn't anything like just checking out a few webcams in exotic locations, that would drive anyone around the bend.

So day after day, he sat in front of his wall of monitors as people came and went and came back and went again and disappeared, reappeared, always ignoring him. No matter how carefully he watched them, they ignored him. Ignored him and ignored him and ignored him, until one day, he just cracked. Sure. She could see that. She could imagine him suddenly jumping up from his chair in front of the wall of monitors and screaming at all those oblivious people entering and leaving and leaving and entering: Goddamit, I am here, I exist! I exist, stop pretending I don't, goddam you all!

After that, everything happens fast. Supervisor comes in, throws him out, and the next thing you know, he's a crazy guy on the street, dancing around telephones and playing to any camera he sees, doing the things he wished all those oblivious, uncaring, under-surveillance people had done for him: i.e., acknowledging the existence of the observer.

The fact that his actions had coordinated with her own movements had been one of those amazing but not totally unheard-of coincidences, a synchronicity that was perhaps a by-product of the technology in a way that had yet to be explained.

Yes. Yes. Yes. Farfetched, maybe, and she could have been wrong about some of the details, but the main virtue of the little story she had just told herself was that it was possible. That it also seemed to endow her with great insight into the modern perils of the human condition didn't hurt. When you didn't

get out much, you had a lot of time to think things through, to contemplate what it was to be human.

She started toward the desk and then stopped. Great explanation, but what if he was doing something that blew the whole thing to pieces?

Like what?

She didn't know. He was a very inventive crazy guy, she couldn't imagine but it might catch her off-guard even as armed as she was with rational thoughts, catch her so off-guard that she became too afraid to look at her own computer monitor. What then? What if she developed an unreasoning fear of the Internet? Except it wouldn't be an unreasoning fear -- and what then?

Well, she knew what then. Agoraphobes were tolerated, even sympathized with a little, but technophobes might as well go jump in a hole somewhere. Or find some telephones to dance around, ideally not far from the cardboard box they called home.

She gave a short laugh and then covered her mouth. And then pulled her left hand away from her face with her right.

Stop it. Stop it right now. There's no reason to go crazy until -- unless -- there's no other choice. So far, there's always been an alternative.

Her gaze fell on her purse, sitting on the sideboard beside one of the lamps she had inherited from her aunt. She left it there as if she might, at any time, just grab it up and leave the house on an errand. Just in case someday she could, or at least wanted to try just leaving the house on an errand, her purse would be ready and waiting for her, so that she couldn't use the excuse of not being able to find it or her wallet or her keys. They were all there, in a cozy heap at the bottom of the purse, underneath her make-up kit, which contained one new (mail-order) lipstick and the premium that had come with it as a reward for ordering before whatever cut-off date that had been: a rather large pocket mirror.

She took the pocket mirror out and opened it up. Her face stared back at her expectantly. She gave another short laugh, this one without a hysterical edge to it. So whose face had she been expecting to see?

Don't go there.

She would sneak up on the monitor, she decided. She would sneak up on it and hold the pocket mirror in front of it and see what her crazy friend was doing, as if in the rear view mirror of a car.

Objects in the mirror are closer than they appear--

She opened the mirror and tiptoed across the room, refusing to acknowledge how silly the whole thing was. When she got to the side of the desk, she crouched down and raised the mirror slowly, angling it until the screen appeared in the small glass.

She saw a piece of cardboard, with large, black numbers written crudely on it: 212-669-8178.

Bewildered, she raised the mirror a little higher. It was the crazy guy, all right, the same crazy guy, and he was holding the cardboard up in front of his chest with both hands. Two women pushing a stroller appeared behind him, then disappeared as he looked back over his shoulder at the telephones. A woman in a red coat materialized as he looked back at the cam; he had raised his right hand to point his thumb at the phones.

212-669-8178, she read. Easily, because it appeared in normal hand even if it was crude. Which meant that he had printed it backwards, as if he had known she would be looking at it in a--

She snapped the mirror shut and scrambled away from the desk backwards.

OK, said the calm voice from somewhere under all the reasoning and unreasoning fear inside her, what did you really see, and what do you think it means?

The calm voice was always there but tended to get drowned out by the soundless scream of panic. Why she could hear it now, when she felt like screaming out loud for real at full, we-go-to-eleven volume was another one of those little mysterious personal contradictions you could never count on happening when you needed it.

What did you really see? asked the voice again.

The mental image of the crazy guy holding up the piece of cardboard with the crude frontwards-backwards numbers hung before her inner eye, daring her to deny it.

Fine, said the calm voice. Accepted, at least for the time being. What do you think it means?

Her inner eye zoomed in on his crazy face. Ginger beard stubble, just like she'd imagined. Pale eyes, like the color had been washed out, faded. Badly chapped lips, so cracked they had split in the fleshier parts. Broken nose, like a boxer's. Filthy jacket--

But what does it mean? That's what it looks like. What does it mean?

"If I knew that," she muttered at her reflection in the hand mirror, "I'd probably be able to leave the house."

The words seemed to hang in the air around her. Like on the old Groucho Marx show she'd seen tapes of You Bet Your Life. That funny bird that came down: Say the secret word and win an extra hundred dollars. Well, you just said it. It's a whole bunch of words, but call it an adjustment for inflation.

The calm voice had no reply to make, probably because it had nothing to tell her she didn't already know. If there was something you didn't know, then what you had to do was ask someone who did. Like asking The Spook about hardware and cams. She could check her email and see if he'd answered yet. She could do that. That would get her back across the room to the computer, have her using it in the normal, unremarkable fashion. If she did that, she just might find that it responded in the normal, unremarkable fashion, no crazy guys holding up signs for her to read in mirrors or telling her to pay attention.

If there was no crazy guy on the monitor, she thought, she would call that doctor and consent to resume medication. When in doubt, keep taking the tablets. Even if they did make her drowsy and fat.

And if there was a crazy guy, she'd bite the bullet and call 212-669-6718, and ask him what the hell was going on.

But first, she would check her email. First she would do the normal thing. Her calm voice would have approved, she thought, if it could have made itself heard. Always do the normal thing first, and then go crazy, it would say wisely. She wondered if the crazy guy knew that rule, and whether he had broken it, or it just hadn't worked for him.

She made herself get up and walk over to the desk. He was waiting there on the monitor, hands in his pockets, or behind his back, his dirty, stubbly face turned up to the camera as usual. Pointedly ignoring him, she opened her email program over him. It chimed immediately; the Spook's reply was already in her mailbox. If he was this prompt, maybe she should ask him about the webcam at 45th and Broadway itself, if there was anything odd about it or--

Dear Friends, just to let you know I'm off for two weeks on the beach in Florida. Not taking my laptop for a change but there is a webcam. I'll be waving hello at 11 a.m. eastern time every morning, so point your browser at the following URL and give me a wave back--

Revolted, Darcy stabbed the delete button and shut the email program without bothering to look at any of the other messages. The crazy guy was waiting underneath, the tilt of his head suggesting he was amused. The image jumped; he was looking over his shoulder at the phone. Jump; he was looking back at the cam.

Her telephone was right next to her computer on the desk. She put her hand on the receiver and just held it for a long moment before picking it up. It took another little while before she could bring herself to push the buttons on the handset, and she did it very slowly. But she did it.

There was a short delay between the time the ringing tone began in the receiver and the crazy guy signifying that he could hear the payphone ringing. It might have been the cam image lag, or it might have been that the speed of sound being slower than the speed of light. Maybe she should take notes, she thought; she might learn something of actual scientific substance.

He took his time getting to the phone, walking backwards to it as slowly as possible. Foot traffic blasted by him, men and women, in pairs, in groups, all alone, obscuring him and then vanishing, showing him untouched and the same.

It took three frames for his hand to make it from his pocket to the receiver. Before the frame changed again, the ringing cut off and she heard the relentless roar of 45th and Broadway. She waited, but that was all she heard.

And then her own voice was large in her head, in her ears, in the room: "I see you."

He turned away for a moment to stare at the phone before turning back to the cam. "Juicy me?"

He didn't sound crazy. He just sounded like a guy, any guy. The guy you got when you called a catalog to order something; the guy who answered queries about your electric bill. The guy who was stuck on the technical support hotline at 4 a.m., when only the most desperate of the desperate were awake and obsessing about some glitch in some far, dark corner of a program they only ran when they couldn't sleep. The guy at the clinic who arranged the telephone appointments with the shrink. Just a guy.

"Yeah, I see you. Do you see me?"

He giggled. The sound annoyed her.

"How do you see me?"

He was in profile on the monitor now, leaning on the phone box. In spite of the people popping in and out and the lousy resolution, she could see the big, goofy grin on his face.

"How do you see me?" she demanded. "Is there a monitor? One, more than one? Is it that anyone who accesses that cam can be seen by -- by--" Passersby kept appearing and vanishing in front of him, around him, making her flustered, making her flounder. "How do you see me? Dammit, who is under surveillance here?"

As she watched, he turned toward the cam again, made a deep, formal bow, held up the receiver and dropped it. Not into the cradle to hang it up, just dropped it so that it dangled, off the hook, still connected to her.

The frame jumped and he was gone.

Darcy sat with her own telephone in one hand, waiting for him to reappear and do something else. Traffic noise drifted out of the earpiece. The complete virtual experience, you are there, webcam and direct phone line.

Surely someone would hang up the phone. Surely someone would.

Surely... if anyone had noticed. The dangling phone receiver seemed to go completely unnoticed.

Alarmed, remembering who had called whom, she slammed down the phone and counted to thirty before picking it up again.

The traffic noise at 45th and Broadway was undiminished. If anything, it seemed to be louder and clearer.

She put the phone down again and counted to sixty. Jiggled the switch-hook, pressed all the buttons.

Unplugged the connection and plugged it back in again.

OK, said the calm voice. You know what you have to do.

"Right," she growled. "Visit the phone company website and report a faulty line."

Maybe it would have worked, except the trouble-reporting area of the website refused to take any input.

"Email someone and ask them to call the phone company on my behalf," she said, and sent a message to everyone in her address book.

And meanwhile, the traffic noise in her telephone went on and on and on, not terribly mismatched to the webcam frame on her screen. Sometimes the dangling receiver would swing in the wind; sometimes it was still.

Occasionally, someone used the telephone next to it and she shouted as loud as she could, but no one heard her desperate request to hang up the receiver.

OK, said the calm voice. You know what you have to do.

"I'll wait," she muttered. "I'll wait and see if anything else works. I'll wait and see if he comes back--"

But she knew he wasn't coming back. There were a million cameras in the naked city; this was only one of them. Besides, maybe he wasn't crazy any more. Maybe he'd managed to be cured, just by getting someone to admit he was visible, he'd been seen.

You know what you have to do.

"No," she said, but faintly, so weakly.

You're going to have to hang that phone up yourself.

"No."

And get someone to admit they can see you.

"No--"

And then you don't have to be afraid any more.

She looked at her purse, still waiting on the sideboard for her. Pretty big errand; not the sort of thing she'd have thought of starting out with.

So what was wrong with being afraid, anyway? It didn't hurt anybody.

But that wasn't the point anyway, she realized, staring at the monitor. It didn't matter whether she was afraid or not afraid. What mattered was the cam. She had been watching, and now it was her turn to be watched. Nothing was going to be right until she took her turn. Only then would everything go back into balance. Not to mention her regular phone service being restored.

She took a deep breath. All right... but... now?

Plane reservations would be easy. Accommodations could be arranged via the same website. What was the big deal about going out? If you could bring it all in and put it on a computer screen -- complete with traffic noise -- then you were already out. The rest was just a technicality. Agoraphobia? Wiped out in our lifetime. Now it's claustrophobia.

In her hurry, she nearly forgot her purse.

The End