

The Autocide Machine

by SCC Overton

I attached the Autocide Machine to a garrotte around my neck and to a small microphone receiver at my breastbone. The garrotte was taut but comfortable; I would be decapitated, it would be over quickly.

A little later I sat with my wife in a pub garden and discussed the machine over a pint of safety beer. My wife was impassive about my choice; in fact she seemed to be unusually calm. I was calm too, having restored my own death to my own hands again. I sipped at my safety and wondered why I hadn't bought a pint of real instead. It didn't matter. I was used to safety and that was my drink of choice, just as the garrotte was my death of choice.

There had been a number of other options and my wife and I discussed these thoughtfully over our drinks. Some people chose to be assassinated by strangers, or even loved ones, some chose fatal maulings by dogs or wild animals. Some people chose to install automatic weapons in the corners of their living rooms like surveillance cameras, to be triggered by infrared links with their ACMs. Others chose more conventional methods like lethal injection or cardio-fibrillation.

My method was to be bloody and grotesque of course but my insurance was to cover incidental costs such as cleaning, public disturbance or personal damage to others. I was even covered for any road accidents I may cause, should my ACM be triggered whilst driving, which was perfectly possible. The

insurance was also to cover the possibility of ACM failure in case I was non-fatally wounded and had to be resuscitated or treated medically.

It had been expensive: the insurance, the endless consultations, the documentation and legal rigmarole, not forgetting the ACM itself, which was custom-made for my convenience and comfort. And what comfort it was to know that I was finally vulnerable again, human again! As fragile and mortal as god had intended!

My wife and I finished our safety beers and were transported home, as usual without risk or inconvenience. Outside my flat I breathed a lungful of toxin-free air and stepped under the microbe eliminator into my home. Life was good, for the first time ever. Balance had been established.

I was surprised at how easy the process had been, despite the expense. It was surprising that such a simple process could have been the result of so many years of legal and constitutional battling. The insurance companies had led the fight, naturally, although they themselves were only responding to market forces. After all, with fewer and fewer available causes of death or injury, the insurance industry had been all but wiped out. Eventually, the only insurance worth having was Death Insurance. It was taken out against living too long and becoming bored with life. It was taken out on behalf of parents with significant properties to bequeath: against them surviving too many generations and their inheritances being made over to grandchildren or great-grandchildren. It was even used as a prerequisite for getting preferential company pensions, pitching retirement quality against retirement quantity.

Of course, where there is demand, so shall there be market. So it was that the very technology that had been developed for our safety was used in unison with the (then redundant) euthanasia legislation that had been introduced to liberate us, and we were given back our most precious and godly gift: the ability to put ourselves at risk of, and perhaps to succumb to, unnatural or untimely death.

My wife had been supportive of my choice all along. We were both refugees of the pre-safety era - she a nurse and I an insurance specialist - both of us made redundant and given unnecessary public service jobs. As a husband and wife team we patrolled the corridors and streets, cleaning and sanitising for four hours a day. It was during one of our patrol performances that we came across our first ACD. It had happened quickly and unexpectedly. It was a young man, perhaps in his late twenties, and it was a series of four or five small explosives that tore his spine from the base of his skull. He barely broke stride when the explosions were triggered, his face still with an expression of calm indifference as he slumped forward, blood pumping lazily upwards against the grain of his short hair. My wife and I scarcely had time to register the death before she had pressed the never-used emergency button on the wall nearby and I had moved to begin cleaning away the blood and burnt skin and carbon dust from the floor. It was then that I realised how absolutely ineffective our cleaning tools were; designed for use in a pollution and bacteria-free environment. After several minutes, during which time my cleaning stick was overloaded and ruined, some agents from an insurance company came and moved us away.

My wife and I were compensated very generously by the same insurance company for the nightmare we had been exposed to. It had been our first experience of death of any kind - real or depicted. It moved both of us in ways we had never anticipated. It brought us closer together as a couple, as humans, even. We made love to each other as if the other was to die at any moment. We toyed with the small risks that were available to us in the environment in which we lived: small amounts of starvation, breath-holding, falls, physical violence, simulated depression and anxiety, fear, vomiting and retching, even sleep deprivation. We began to try everything we could, flirting with death just as a teenager might flirt with sexuality: each tantalising experience bringing him closer to some inevitable but unimaginable goal.

Death itself was the next step in our seduction of ourselves, and through my old connections in insurance I was able to find out about the more simple, time-limited auticides. The second ACD my wife and I witnessed was that of an aging businessman whose ACM was programmed to temporarily override his electronic front door and cause it to bludgeon him to death against the frame. The time had been preset in the ACM, and my wife and I were positioned respectfully out of sight down the corridor. The man paused for only a moment before entering his flat, simply adjusting his tie and straightening his back; just another end of another normal commute. He took a few minutes to die, but this had been part of the contract as the insurance company, and I, was aware.

We witnessed several other auticides during this period: a suffocation, a fall from a failed rooftop railing, an electrocution, a drowning, two fatal attacks by household pets and one assassination by an unsuspecting passerby. We even saw

two lovers, pledged to each other by their ACMs, dying by poison in a morbid embrace. Each death breathed new life into us. Each shock, each jarring nauseating experience made us more real, more organic, more sentient.

We continued, experiencing everything until the only thing left to us, the last, most terrifying and most stimulating fantasy, was that of our own deaths.

My death - by decapitation (something relatively unique and rather stylised, I thought) - was to be triggered by a word or phrase that I would utter and would be picked up by my chest microphone. Thinking about that first death - that of the young man whilst we were on duty: his final expression of pure, divine ignorance, the bliss-like unawareness of his own mortality and immortality - we decided that the trigger would be unknown to me and would be chosen by my wife. She didn't take long to decide, and the programming was completed more quickly than any other part of the Autocide Machine process. We celebrated with a drink in a local pub and then returned home.

And then, once my ACM was fitted, the honeymoon ended. My conviction didn't change, and neither did that of my wife as far as I could tell; and besides, my insurance premium covered me against changing my mind and having to have the ACM delicately removed through surgery. But nothing happened. The thrill of feeling the imminence of my own death turned into complacency and then boredom. I became dissatisfied with death, just as I had become so with life. I entered into interminable conversations and disagreements and arguments with my wife, endlessly trying to draw out of her the trigger phrase as if that knowledge would give me respite from the empty impotence I again felt. I could

scarcely admit it, but the very thing that had liberated me had imprisoned me in the same way. It clung to my neck, day and night, entirely benign.

The phrase was eight words, to be uttered in order without pausing. The phrase was: "You don't love me, I don't love you." I uttered these words at the end of another long, complicated discussion. My sense of futility and powerlessness had by that time manifested in a kind of paranoia: that if she could knowingly hold such authority over me, she must have also rendered herself vulnerable to the same thing. In other words, I suspected that she had fitted her own Autocide Machine.

It's not important, though. As our argument circled toward its logical conclusion, that 'if she didn't love me, then I didn't love her', I could see something growing within her - creasing the corners of her eyes in anticipation, tightening her hands in fear, twitching her thighs in rapture. Ultimately then, as her final calculated question drew me to my long-sought answer a look of contentment came over her, and as the garrotte began to cut my throat I thought that I glimpsed the same joy in her eye that I knew I had in mine.

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