

Brian Fawcett / THE WORLD MACHINES

Around noon on my nineteenth birthday, Old Man Nelson showed up at the small shack I lived in. I heard him coming, talking to himself as usual, and I opened the door as he reached for the doorknob. He would have walked in without knocking, like most people. With him I didn't mind—he owned the land my shack stood on, and he'd never once asked me to pay any rent.

"Put your coat on, son," he said in his slight Scandinavian accent. "I got something you need to know about. It's your birthday present."

Old Man Nelson drove a huge black Oldsmobile that looked like a gangster's car. But he didn't look like a gangster. He looked like what he was: a retired logger who'd made a lot of money and who told stories about everything under the sun except how he'd made his money. I don't remember how I got to know him, but since I liked to listen to his stories and I lived on one of the many properties he owned, we came as close as young men and old men come to real friendship. For a couple of years, I spent quite a lot of time listening to him.

"You know," he began, as he turned the big Oldsmobile out of the alley, "them buggers who run things don't do it by themselves, eh?"

He knew this question would interest me because we frequently talked about how things were run around the city. I'd noticed, among other things, that even though the Mayor and Council of our small town were stupid and short-sighted men, they exercised a degree of authority and control they couldn't possibly have understood and certainly didn't earn. There was a kind of gap between what they said about how things worked and the complex and overlapping processes by which even I could see the city operated. This gap, which I merely sensed without understanding its workings, was a disturbing darkness that resided at the core of the town. I could never quite forget that it was there.

I began to see it while I was a small boy watching the city crews dig up the streets, install pipes in the holes, and then fill in the holes. The next year they would do the same thing over again. One year, according to my father, it was water pipes. The next year, sewer pipes. Another year, gas. Then they replaced the pipes. I believed, as most children do, that the world and every action in it had a purpose; that it was under some sort of benevolent and rational control, even though I'd already begun to realize there was very little evidence to back this up. Watching the crazy way the crews dug up the streets every year by itself convinced me, by itself, that whatever was going on wasn't rational or benevolent on any terms I could understand, but I continued to believe that at least it operated on some sort of logic. But what was that logic, and what did it serve? As I grew older, finding the answer to that question preoccupied me, and consequently, Old Man Nelson's opener snapped me to attention.

"What do you mean, they don't do it by themselves?"

Old Man Nelson had a way of telling stories that made things fuzzier before it made them clear. That was one of the reasons I liked listening to his storehouse stream of anecdotes and stories. Listening to them was like walking into a fog, and coming out with money in my pocket. All I had to do was show some curiosity, then nod my head in the right places to assure him that I was listening carefully. He'd talk, and I generally learned something interesting or useful.

"Well," he said slowly, "those buggers don't know much of anything. They just know where the switches are, and they like having people running this way and that more than they should."

I nodded, but kept silent. It made sense, but this wasn't the right time to ask questions. I let the fog spread further out.

"Out by the lake I'll show you something you've never seen before," he said.

I'd been to the lake dozens of times, and I'd never seen anything unusual, except maybe the time my sister got a bloodsucker up her nose.

"You've never seen it because you didn't expect anything unusual to be there," he said, fielding my unasked question perfectly. "That's the way these guys do things. They put things where nobody expects them to be, and so nobody looks right at them. You can't see what anything is unless you look right at it. Even then what you're seeing can't be understood if you don't have the words to get a hold on it."

"Who's 'they'?" I asked. We shared a taxonomy but our vocabularies were slightly different. For instance, Old Man Nelson called the Mayor and Council "them buggers." I referred to them as "those assholes." Maybe the difference was because they really hadn't done anything to me yet, and Old Man Nelson often complained that they spent most of their energy thinking up ways to screw him.

"The Bosses," he said.

"You mean those assholes down at City Hall?"

"No. Them buggers don't know nothing. I mean the Big Bosses." He paused. "The ones you never see. If you're really doing something you don't go strutting around like a rooster, crowing about it."

"So what do these Big Bosses do, anyway?"

"They run everything, and they make sure nobody gets out."

I sat in the roomy imitation leather seat beside Old Man Nelson and watched the shacks whiz by outside the car window, mulling over the idea. I wondered for a moment if he was talking about God, and decided he wasn't. He didn't believe in that crap, and neither did I, anymore. The idea of God used to be comforting. This idea wasn't. I didn't know a lot, but I had figured out that anyone with that kind of power wasn't going to be interested in me. Power was for assholes, and I didn't want to be an asshole. I didn't know what I wanted to be but I knew that there were a lot of assholes out there. The world was full of assholes, and the world seemed to be changing in such a way that only assholes would be able to get anywhere in it. Old Man Nelson was about the only adult I knew who wasn't an asshole, come to think of it.

"You asleep?" he asked, as much to prevent me from falling asleep as anything.

I had a talent for sleeping. I could sleep anywhere, anytime, without the slightest provocation. I think he admired that talent more than anything else about me. He often said that if he didn't talk to me constantly I'd drop off on him. Then he'd laugh and tell me to get lots of sleep now, because when I got old like him I wouldn't ever get any sleep. He didn't sleep much, he said, because he knew too much, and if he let his guard down, them buggers would walk all over him.

"I'm not sleepy today," I said. "What did you mean when you said the Bosses run everything?"

Old Man Nelson paused, as if figuring out a way to make it simple enough for me to understand. Whenever he was thinking hard an odd expression came over his face, a grin that made him look part goat and part elf. "People get up in the morning and then they sleep most of the night, right?"

"Right." I didn't bother to complicate things by pointing out that he didn't sleep that way.

"Why?" he asked, flatly.

"What do you mean, why?" I replied. "Because that's how things work. You can't stay awake all the time. If you tried, you'd get too tired to stay awake, and then..."

I sensed that I was digging myself into a hole. "Darkness makes people sleepy," I finished lamely. "I dunno."

"If everybody got up when they wanted to, and slept when they wanted to, the Bosses' system would get bugged up," he said.

"Some people would sleep all the time, like you, and some would sleep all day and stay up all night, and some people wouldn't sleep at all."

"I guess."

"And things would start to change."

"Yeah?" I said, starting to see some shapes in the fog. For one thing, I was going to have to revise my theory about change. Instead of changing things, the Bosses were keeping things as they were.

"Yeah. So the Bosses keep it all going the way it already is."

"If everybody did what they wanted wouldn't everything just break down?"

Old Man Nelson gazed at me patiently. "At first, that's about all it would be. But after a while people would start seeing what really needs to be done, and when that happened, things would start to change."

"So how do the Bosses keep things from changing?"

"That's what I'm going to show you," he said.

"So what you're saying is that the Bosses don't want anything to change, and that's a bad thing, is that it?"

"Sure. They don't want real change, anyway. Things in the City can grow bigger, like trees do, and if they grow bigger people think things are changing when they're not. But if something different—really different—starts to happen then the Bosses might lose."

"Might lose what?"

"I dunno. I've never figured out what it is they're so damned scared of losing. Money, maybe, but maybe something more."

"Something more?" I asked. "Like what?"

Old Man Nelson shook his head. "You wouldn't understand if I told you."

"How come you know all this?" I asked. "Is it because you don't sleep much yourself?"

Old Man Nelson thought that one through before he answered. I felt the car slow down.

"I dunno about that either," he said, finally. "I guess I got a funny ticker in me. Damn thing doesn't work like it's supposed to. I keep waking up with my heart pumping like a pack of dogs chasing a rabbit, and I start seeing things."

The car speeded up again, and I watched the shacks along the roadside get blurry until they seemed like one, long, continuous shack. They began to peter out, and for a while, all there was to look at was blurred birch and poplar thickets.

As we started up the long ridge that overlooked the lake, the countryside started to change. The trees got larger, and, I noticed for the first time, more evenly spaced. Old Man Nelson was whistling quietly. The tune was unfamiliar, but catchy. We reached the crest of the ridge, and I could see the brilliant blue water of the lake below.

"Down we go," said Old Man Nelson, and abruptly pulled the car off the main road, through a shallow thicket of willows and onto a narrow paved lane I didn't know was there. For a second I thought he'd gone crazy and was smashing up the car. We'd been going at least fifty miles per hour.

"Not many people know about this road," he said, as if that explained his peculiar method of entering it.

"I sure didn't," I whispered, beginning to breathe again as he slowed down.

I couldn't see the lake anywhere, and it should have been easily visible as soon as we pulled off the main highway. The lane we were slipping silently along was strange. I could see it hadn't been used much, because the tarmac was still clean and black. The underbrush crowded closely along it, and in places had begun to infringe on the margins. I didn't know what to make of it, and I sat there, expecting the lake to appear any second. But it didn't, and Old Man Nelson kept driving.

Then the underbrush along the sides of the lane thinned out and disappeared, and the evergreens went with it. The evergreens had been replaced by geometrically spaced poplars, their pale olive-green trunks unspotted and straight. The lane flattened out, and seemed to turn back on itself. I felt panic rising in me; I'd heard the stories about old men kidnapping people and killing them, although I couldn't really relate those stories to Old Man Nelson. As if to reassure me, he chuckled to himself and told me it was just a little further.

The lane curved through the poplars again, and ended abruptly in a small clearing. At the head of the clearing the ground rose sharply and there was something like the front of a building cut into the hill. It was odd-looking, constructed as an arch with two pillars about twenty feet high on each side of the doors. The doors themselves were glass, like the kind they put in supermarkets. They even had the recessed rubber mats in front of them that make the doors open automatically.

Old Man Nelson brought the Oldsmobile to a halt at the far edge of the clearing, and I stepped out into a field of plants. They were flowering, and I recognized them as Indian paintbrushes. Like the poplars, they were native to the area, and like the poplars they had obviously been planted in a rigid geometry that made them seem as foreign as they should have been familiar. Then I remembered that it was still early summer, and that Indian paintbrushes bloomed much later in the year, in August.

"They're smart sons-of-bitches," Old Man Nelson said as I knelt down to pick one of the red flowers. "They get them to bloom right from the time they come up out of the snow until freeze-up. But they don't taste good like the real ones do."

I pulled one of the nectar tubes from the flower and sucked the transparent liquid from it. It tasted bitter and I spat it out.

"You should listen to me better," Old Man Nelson laughed. "Let's go inside and I'll show you some things."

He walked toward the glass doors and, sure enough, they opened when he stepped on the rubber mat. We went inside and I followed him down a dim corridor.

"What is this place?" I asked, the questions bubbling out of me involuntarily. "Who owns it? Are you sure we're supposed to be in here?"

"You ask too many questions all at once, and none of them are the right ones," he answered, his voice echoing along the corridor.

"Who built this place?" I continued, searching for the right question without any idea of what it was or how to find it. "How long have you known about it? Does everybody know about it? How long are we going to be in here? Do you know the people who run this? Do you know how to get out of here?"

"Wrong questions, wrong questions!" answered Old Man Nelson, waving his hands but not stopping to turn around.

I gave up and followed him silently down the corridor. The walls moved back, and above me in the gloom I could just barely make out a network of huge steel pipes that stretched out and up in both directions. Here and there the network was penetrated by steel walkways and platforms, each with an array of wheelvalves, switches and small coloured lights. From the low, even hum I knew that whatever the installation was, it was working, operating. What it was doing, I had no clue.

Except for Old Man Nelson and me, it was deserted. I was lagging behind—for an elderly man, Old Man Nelson walked swiftly, certainly, and I found myself scrambling to stay up with him. When I got even with him, I caught at his sleeve.

“What is this place?” I asked, almost pleading. “Where are we going?”

Old Man Nelson gazed at me without slowing his pace, and without answering my questions. As I grabbed at his sleeve again, he swerved out of my grasp and into an alcove I hadn’t seen. He stopped, and waited for me to enter behind him.

“Wait,” he whispered, “We can’t talk here.”

I obeyed, and found myself following him down a long, narrow corridor with a low ceiling. Up ahead I could see that the corridor ended in a set of glass doors much like the ones we’d come in by.

Old Man Nelson stepped on the rubber mat, the doors opened, and he walked through them into a room that was instantly flooded with bright light. I followed, skipping into a run to keep the doors from closing against me.

“We can talk here,” he said, calmly.

The flood of my questions washed over him until he waved me back.

“I’ll start from the beginning,” he said. “This installation is one of their machines. I don’t know for sure how large it is. Very large, obviously. It isn’t the only one I’ve seen, either. I discovered another one, smaller and not so fancy, years ago, just before I left the Old Country.”

“What is it for?” I asked. “Who built it?”

“The Bosses built it,” said Old Man Nelson. “They built it to prevent us from changing the way things are. They keep them hidden to prevent people from finding them and understanding what they’re doing. If people found out how much of their lives were controlled they might tear them down.”

“But we’re here,” I said. “You found two of them, and now you’re showing me this one.”

“Hah!” He scoffed. “You’re gonna see how much difference that makes. I’ve been trying to show this thing to people for thirty years now, and you’re the first one I got to see it.”

“Thirty years? I’m the first one?” I felt equally tempted by both questions.

“I took my own boys out here but they just laughed at me. They couldn’t see what I was talking about.”

I knew he had three sons, and that he didn't have much use for any of them. Two were already wealthy logging contractors, and the third was at some big university back east studying to be a lawyer. Old Man Nelson's criticism of them was always the same: "too goddamn busy making money to see what the money was making them into."

"You're saying that this thing has been here for thirty years?" I asked, not quite believing that it could have been. It looked new, and from the entrance, very modern.

"I only said I've *known* about it for thirty years," he said, smiling at me as if I should know better. "It wasn't this big when I first found it."

"How big is it?"

Old Man Nelson scratched his chin just as if he were trying to decide out how many steps it was to the corner store.

"I walked it out this way, a few years ago," he said, pointing in the direction we'd been going. "I figure it goes almost all the way to the river, which is about nine miles. Down at the far end you can hear the river if you put your ear to the wall. The last time I checked it didn't go as far to the north, but then that was where the newest machinery was, so I don't know how much it's grown."

"What does it do?" I asked, after a moment of silence.

"I can't answer that for you," he said. "I can show you what it is, but I can't tell you what it does, exactly."

I waited for him to explain what he meant by that, but he didn't elaborate. Another silence ensued, but it wasn't, I realized, really silent. Beneath our voices was the sound of the machine, which alternated regularly between a deep rumble and a drone-like hum.

"Can we go further in," I asked, "so I can figure it out for myself?"

"We could," he said, "but it wouldn't help you. Besides, there's a danger I might lose track of you, and I don't know if you could get out on your own."

"Can we try to go further anyway?"

"You can always try," he said, his tone shifting, as if we were suddenly discussing another matter. "But it's the same here as anywhere else. You'll reach a place where you're not capable of taking in what you're seeing, and when that point is reached you stop being able to understand. If you can't understand things, you come under their control. That's no good. You've got to take this in a little at a time."

I didn't understand what was going on and I didn't really understand much of what he was saying, and instinctively I began to look around me for something material that would enable me to. He lapsed into silence, and I turned and sidled over to examine one of the walls of the room. When I touched it, it was utterly smooth, undefined, although from a distance it had appeared to be rough concrete. I jerked my hand back, alarmed.

"It's like that," he said. "That's the frightening part. From a distance, it seems to make sense, and it can almost look familiar. But the closer you come to it the less definition it has. That's one of the ways you recognize their materials."

"Are there other entrances?"

"Lots of them. They're all over the place, but it's difficult to recognize what they are when you see them. The one we entered by is the only one I know how to reach. I guess you could say that it belongs to me."

"Are you here a lot? I mean, do you spend very much of your time in here?"

Old Man Nelson sighed. "You better start to watch your language more carefully. I don't 'spend' time—that's their way of thinking. I lose time here, but I don't spend it, because I get nothing back, and neither does anyone else. And I'm here a lot. More and more as the years go on."

I wasn't used to fluorescent lights, and my eyes were getting sore. Worse, I was having trouble breathing. The room—and the whole installation—was air-conditioned, but all that did was to flavour the air with an acrid dustiness. I wanted to get out, but I also wanted to find out as much as I could about the place.

"Where are we now?" I asked, gesturing at the walls around us. "What is this room?"

"It's sort of a museum," Old Man Nelson replied with an ironic chuckle. "I've found a few of them like this. The only difference between this and the rest of the installation is that out there, anything resembling a question and answer sequence activates the control panels. In here, as far as I can tell, nothing happens. That's why I brought you here to answer your questions."

"How'd you find out about that if you've never brought anyone else here?"

"I didn't say that. I said that no one else has been able to see what it is. You should listen more carefully." He took my arm and pushed me gently in the direction of the doors. I balked.

"One more question?"

"Okay, ask it. But no more."

"I don't understand how this can be a museum. There's nothing here except bright lights and walls I can't see properly. Museums are supposed to be full of relics, dead things. This place is more like a waiting room."

"This is a museum—at least on the Bosses' terms. A museum, as far as they're concerned, is just a warehouse to store dangerous substances in, a place where things or ideas are put in order to make them inactive. Does that answer your question?"

It didn't, but I nodded anyway. "I guess so," I said.

I followed him back down the corridor and into the larger cavern with its overhead array of pipes. Old Man Nelson turned back the way we'd come. I wanted to see more, so I quietly slipped off in the opposite direction. I was hoping that by the time he noticed I'd be so far away he'd have to let me go on by myself. There was nothing about the installation that was frightening to me. Already it seemed familiar and dull, and it didn't feel like I was in any physical danger. After all, the place was empty except for the two of us, and the machinery was far above my head, humming steadily.

I walked several hundred yards without looking behind me, and heard nothing from Old Man Nelson. When I turned around to see if he was coming after me, he'd vanished. That didn't alarm me. I knew roughly where I was, and getting out was simply a matter of following the long corridor back to the entrance where, no doubt, Old Man Nelson would be waiting.

I walked, the sound of my footsteps lost beneath the hum, for what felt like several miles. But the landscape around me, if that's what it was, stayed the same. Then, among the gunmetal grey of the pipes overhead appeared other colours: at first pastels, and then richer primary colours. The effect was of a riot of colour. I was gazing up into them when I bumped into Old Man Nelson.

"Are you impressed?" he asked.

"With what? With all this?"

"With the colour," he laughed. "Do you know where you are?"

Until that moment I thought I knew where I was. But since I had no idea how Old Man Nelson had gotten there, I was no longer so sure. Without waiting for my answer, he took me by the arm and walked me through a set of automatic glass doors. I was startled to find myself outside the entrance we'd entered by.

Old Man Nelson didn't offer any explanation. He just told me to get into the car.

"It's getting late," he said gruffly, as if he regretted the entire episode. "I've got some things I have to take care of."

Overhead, the sky had clouded over, and the poplars were shimmering in the light breeze, exposing the silvery undersides of their leaves like they always do before it rains.

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But it didn't rain that afternoon. It should have, but since that afternoon, nothing else has been the way it should be, or the way it used to be. We drove back to town on the dusty gravel roads. Old Man Nelson didn't have much to say and neither did I. He dropped me off at the shack and as I got out of the big black car I thanked him for showing me the machines. He just laughed in a preoccupied sort of way.

"You don't have to thank me for that," he said. "The buggers were there all the time. Now you gotta figure out what they are,

and how to remember what they are. After that, you'll have to decide what you're going to do about them."

* * *

I knew exactly what to do. Those machines were composed of pipes and there was a network of pipes in the ground all through the city. Obviously, they were connected. I turned my small shack upside down trying to find where they entered. Then I realized that my place wasn't like most—I had no running water, no toilet, no gas. I checked the electrical system, but found nothing unusual except a third bare copper wire that seemed to have no purpose.

For weeks after that, I drove everyone I knew crazy as I checked their houses for pipes. I found apparently disconnected pipes and irrelevant wires everywhere I looked, but I couldn't establish a pattern to any of it, no logic. I gave up when my mother, after eyeing me carefully while I searched her house, suggested that perhaps I should see a doctor about my problem.

* * *

That August, Old Man Nelson died on me. I didn't get to see very much of him after he showed me the machines. He just didn't come around. I wanted to go out to see the machines again, but we didn't have the kind of friendship that allowed me to visit him. He'd always come by on his own time, and now he didn't seem to have much of it for me. It was as if he were in a hurry, all of a sudden. He told me himself that he was busy—"planning something important," he said when I ran into him on a downtown street one hot afternoon. He looked tired, older than before, his step slower, his breathing laboured. I didn't think too much about it because his eyes were as bright and alert as ever—maybe more so.

I had a hard time finding out the exact details of his death. His wife didn't like me, and because his sons knew the old man preferred my company to theirs, they didn't like me either. I sent a note when I heard about his death, but nobody answered it. I even phoned his wife. But since I didn't really know what I wanted to ask her, and she was aggressively not interested in talking to me about anything, our conversation was a short one. From what I was able to piece together, Old Man Nelson organized a family reunion of some sort—all his sons were in town before he died, and so were a number of relatives. The reunion—a picnic—

was held at the lake less than a mile from the stretch of road where he'd pulled the car through that thicket to show me the entrance to the machine.

At the picnic, the old man had attempted to take the family for a walk in the woods. When they refused to go with him, he flew into a rage, storming off, deliberately, according to his son, into one of the impenetrable alder and devil's club thickets that surround the lake.

When he didn't come back, a search was launched. They found him in a small clearing at the heart of the thicket. At first they thought he was sleeping, his head cradled comfortably on a mossy log amid the Indian paintbrushes that filled the clearing. The paintbrushes were in full bloom, but the old man was dead. His wife said that it was his heart.

I went to the funeral, even though I knew Old Man Nelson had been a vocal atheist. A preacher got up and had a few things to say about the life beyond, and how, although he didn't know "the deceased," as he put it, he was certain that Old Man Nelson was going to his deserved reward. None of the sons delivered a eulogy, and there weren't very many people there, considering Old Man Nelson lived in town for close to fifty years. I didn't go to the interment, and the family didn't hold a wake. They all looked impatient during the service, like they were needed elsewhere.

I hitch-hiked out to the lake a few days later. The man who gave me the ride out thought I was a bit nuts, wanting to get out on a stretch of deserted highway, particularly since it was fire season and a small fire was burning in some slash only two or three miles away.

"You never know when those fires can take off with the wind and burn off a whole god-damned hillside," he told me.

"Not this one," I replied, and slammed the car door shut, waving him on.

I found the lane easily; it was simply “there,” as if it had been waiting for me. But as I walked down the gently sloping tarmac, I sensed a change: the poplars were losing their leaves, and as I reached the turn where, before, the trees grew in regimented order across the flattened park-like landscape, instead of order I saw carnage: trees with broken tops, trees blown down, and here and there between them, mounds of debris: old house siding, bits of stucco, broken bottles, scraps of pastel plastic. In the clearing where the glass doors with the columns had been, there was a sizeable gravel pit, the bottom covered with about two feet of slimy water rhinestoned with gasoline and diesel. The air was rife with the stink of garbage and petroleum.

The entrance to the machine itself was different. The glass doors had been removed and in their place were heavy steel doors of the same gun-metal grey of the first pipes I’d seen inside. The rubber mats were gone, and so were the columns.

I tried the door, and it opened—not automatically, and not easily—but it did open. I hesitated, not sure if it was safe to enter, and as I did so I heard a familiar laugh. I spun around, and there, just beyond the gravel pit, I thought I caught a glimpse of Old Man Nelson disappearing into an alder thicket.

I hurtled after him, down into the pit and through the scummy water, and I scrambled up the slope after him into the thicket. But there was nothing there but the trees. Not a thing moved. There was nothing but the dappled sunlight filtering through the trees. I stood still for a moment, and then my ears picked up the faintest hum. In front of me was a clearing, and as if what the old man showed me had never been, the Indian paintbrushes bloomed in honeyed disarray beneath the smokey August sun. I sat down among them and waited. The hum grew louder, and I remembered that I’d left the doors to the cavern open. I got to my feet, and turned back.