

Nodak 97

James North

"Software Glitch Leaves US Navy Ship Dead in the Water! On 21 September 1997, a division by zero error on board the USS Yorktown... Most Flood Victims did not Have Flood Insurance... Being Homeless is Nothing New, Red Drives Mission Residents to Another Shelter..."

K. Knutson stopped on this one article and began to read.

How homeless can you get? Those who lived at the Grand Forks Mission doubled their homeless status when the Red River drove them out the door nearly three weeks ago. On Wednesday, some of them arrived at their third "home" since: a de-iced hockey rink. "In a way, we're sort of used to it," said Bob, a nine-year resident of the Mission who asked that his actual name not be published. "I mean, every day is a flood day to us."

K. Knutson skipped past the article. Flood news was a daily occurrence, but there wasn't much he could do to help. Grand Forks was over a two-hour drive east. Besides, he had bills to pay.

The news was mundane. No "Bat Boy Captured!" unfortunately.

K. Knutson perused the newspaper in boredom, glancing at the headlines. His eyes skimmed, not really reading the words but not really *not* reading them either, while sipping his coffee occasionally. Black, no cream, no sugar. After you've had Army coffee, anything else tasted so good by comparison there was no point in diluting it.

"Top off?" Greta asked.

"Sure thing," K. replied, smiling at the waitress.

"So, what's the news?" Greta asked, smiling back and glancing down at the spread of newspapers.

"Oh, you know. Disaster relief out in Grand Forks is going on. Homeless don't have anywhere to sleep."

"Uffda," Greta said. "That's just awful. Me and some of the ladies down at Saint Mary's Lutheran have been packing care packages after the Sunday service."

"Well, that's kind of you."

"Thank you, Kerry, it's the least I can do. I wish I could do more really, but I gotta work here all the time I got."

"Amen."

"Hey Kerry, tell me something." Greta was lingering by his booth; other than the two of them and the cook in the back, the diner was empty.

"Sure," K. answered.

"How come you're always in here so late? Auto-shop opens up at 8 a.m."

"I don't sleep so good," K. said. He glanced at the clock on the wall. Just after midnight.

Greta eyed the tattoo on his forearm. It was a faded unit insignia, but the symbol was still discernible: a U-shaped, Siamese cruciform.

"Yeah, but you don't stay in here till 8. Where do you go after you leave this place? There isn't much to do around here." She looked at him inquiringly, good naturedly. "Night fishing? Muskie? Walleye?"

"No, not quite fishing." K looked somewhat embarrassed before reaching over to the small bag sat next to him. He unfastened the top and removed a battery-powered tape deck and a strange-looking device.

"You ever seen one of these before?"

"Yeah, it's a tape recorder," Greta remarked, puzzled but interested. "What you got that for?"

"It's a Marantz PMD-201 tape recorder," K. stated. "I use that, along with this." He tapped the strange device, a sort of small microphone apparatus.

"What's that?"

"It's a field recorder."

"It looks like an electric razor."

K. laughed. "It does, doesn't it? It doesn't shave beards, though. No, it's for recording audio."

"What sort of audio?" Greta asked. She sat across from him in the booth, no longer pretending to be fulfilling the duties of her job.

"Field recordings. It's like nature audio. Nature, without outside influence."

"What for?"

K. hesitated. "Something to do, I guess. I like it. It's peaceful, you know? Nobody else out there, wide open fields. You can see forever."

"Sounds nice. You look at the stars while you do it?" Greta asked.

"Sometimes. Sometimes I just listen. I listen to them with headphones, then I take the tapes home, play them around the house."

"That's an interesting hobby, Kerry," Greta said, smiling.

"It's nothing really," said K. He put away the equipment.

"No really, I mean it. Very dedicated. Reminds me of the fishermen out here, in a way. Only what you're fishing for isn't so much a fish as a state of mind." She stood up. "Let me know if I can get you more coffee, Kerry."

With that she was off, waiting on a red-eyed long-haul trucker who'd just arrived. Kerry stood up, tucked the newspaper under his arm, and collected his things and grabbed his beat-up Carhartt. He left four dollars on the table. "See you, Greta," he said, and then stepped out into the brisk early-morning September air.

He sat behind the wheel of his great big old Buick, counting the Indian heads of the road signs as he cruised up State Route 3, in the direction of Bottineau. He couldn't make out much in the barren corn fields; the crop had already been harvested this season. Occasionally, he saw the reflected eyes of deer staring back at him from the darkness, and he drove carefully. Eventually, as he drove, even the cornfields ended, yielding to natural fields of wild grass.

He turned off, on a nondescript dirt road, and headed off into the dark expanse of fields. He drove on and on in the serene sea of

emptiness before pulling down a remote farm road. Halfway down, he parked his car, shut off the engine, and stepped out into the early morning air.

He made his way out into the tall grasses. He couldn't quite see his breath yet, not this early in the year, but soon the nights would dip below freezing, then the days, then the ruthless North Dakota winter would grip the state once more.

But not yet.

He walked for a couple miles and stood under the expanse of the firmament. He often came out to this particular field; there was something special about it. He readied his equipment, donned his headphones, slowed his breathing rate, and began recording.

He stood there, taking it all in. He breathed rhythmically, and he closed his eyes. He listened to the wind. The rustling of the tall grasses. The tentative steps of deer in the distance. Of prairie dogs. Distant birdsong. He remained this way for an instantaneous eternity.

When the tape ran out, he pulled the headphones down about his neck and began walking further. As he did so, he labeled the tape and tucked it into his bag, retrieving a fresh one. Some mornings he'd burn through two or three tapes this way, while wandering through the fields, traipsing about a stream, or sitting beside a lake or pond. Sometimes he even drove further, into the Turtle Mountains, but this, this was his favorite spot.

He had finished his second tape and begun walking around, looking for where to start the third. He found himself drifting further out into the field than he had gone before. The stars overhead were brilliant and the wind was still. He could hear the muffled sound of his own heartbeat in his ears beneath the bulky headphones. He stumbled slightly, then caught himself. He felt somewhat disoriented but couldn't place it. He popped in the third tape and began the recording.

A nonexistent moment.

Stuck in timelessness, in spacelessness.

The rivers of the cosmos funneling into a gaping lacuna. Stars bled their lifeblood unceasingly for an immeasurable fraction, then blinked out. Nebulae were reduced to meagerness, then gone. Depersonalization. Derealization. His perception bled away from the fringes into an engulf. Annihilated. The world was gone, had never even been.

Emptiness beyond emptiness: the lack of emptiness. Contradictory quiet. Void of void. Like this for timeless eons. Nihilistic proto-pre-birth. He was gone.

The tape clicked; it had finished recording. He could hear his heartbeat again, pounding faintly beneath his bulky headset. This was just enough impetus to refocus an inkling of his attention, and he was aware once again of his body. He struggled against the mesmerizing *thing* which held him in its sway, desperately fought to regain sensation. He stumbled backward tentatively, like a fawn getting its legs, before inelegantly beginning to topple. He transferred this momentum into a few clumsy, bounding steps before he faceplanted in the dirt. He lay there for a long time, trying to parse what he had just experienced. His feeble human mind couldn't begin to make sense of it.

Unbeknownst to him, this was to his benefit—if he could have, he would have been driven mad.

His head spun, attempted to reorient itself to the comparative sensory overload that was the normal human experience. His sensorium shook with a rumbling sound like industrial machinery. His vision was slowly beginning to return, first from the center, spreading outward to the edges.

He scabbled to his hands and knees and took deep, controlled breaths to keep from hyperventilating. Gradually, his breathing slowed and his focus returned. How long had he been under the spell of that thing? And what the hell was it? Was it even a thing?

By now, he had mustered enough strength to roll himself over to a seated position, and he examined the field. There was nothing there. Nothing but the tall grass. Overhead, the stars coruscated. In

the distance, he heard the rustling footsteps of a deer. Closer, he heard the much noisier rummaging sounds of a prairie dog. What had he just experienced?

One moment he was here. The next, there was nothing. True nothingness, total absence of life, of existence, of reality. It was sickening. He sat there for a long time.

"Look what the cat dragged in," quipped Big Al. "Tie one too many on at Lee's last night?"

It was 8:25. K. was 25 minutes late to work.

"Lost track of time," K. said.

"Not like we're busy," said Big Al, who thumbed his way idly through last month's issue of *Field and Stream*. At eight in the morning it was hardly hot out yet, but Big Al's thick neck already had a thin veneer of perspiration, and the man even sat next to an ancient box fan dialed up to max.

K. walked back into the large open bay. He had far too much energy and couldn't sit still. He settled with organizing tools to occupy the time. They didn't have any actual business until after 9, when an old Ford rolled into the shop. K. leapt at the opportunity, needing something to get his mind off The Nothing.

"I got this one," he called out to Big Al, then walked to the truck.

Big Al had scarcely begun to heft his immense girth off his stool before he was sitting back down again, wiping the rapidly accumulating sweat from his forehead with his crumpled old trucker's cap.

A routine oil change was all that was needed, and soon K. was left once again with his thoughts. What the hell was that, out in the field? He must be misremembering things; what he had experienced was impossible. He must have fallen asleep, dozed off only to slip into macabre dreams out in the expanse of wild grass. He'd get off work, go home, and pop the tape in. He'd hear his usual tranquility. Blades of grass in the wind.

Distant chirping of birds. The mating calls of insects. Graceful, nearly inaudible brushing sounds of deer. The tape would prove

everything. With that realization, he was even more invigorated, and the rest of his shift dragged on impossibly long. At five minutes till five he made his way out one of the big bay doors and waved to Big Al as he went.

"See ya, K.," hollered Al. The man was still firmly rooted at the stool, which he had spent the better part of the day perched atop like a rotund golf ball on a tee.

The Buick growled to life, and K pulled out of the lot, then down 4th Street.

There weren't any stop lights in town, and he caught his speed nervously creeping up more than once.

K. arrived home, pulled the tape from his bag, and dropped the bag by the door.

He walked quickly into the living room. It was the living room of an older bachelor. A green recliner occupied one end of the room, and a massive stereo system the other. With trembling hands, K. inserted the tape into the tape deck, a top-of-the-line Nakamichi machine, gingerly closing the door mechanism after.

His finger hovered over the play button.

After a moment, he instead decided to fast forward through the tape. If what he remembered of the incident in the field was real, he didn't want it to last all that long the second time through. He stopped the tape with only a minute or so left on the reel.

Again, his finger hovered over the play button. He felt a nervousness that he hadn't felt in a long, long time. Painstakingly, he pressed the button.

Awareness died. The light of distant stars wept for a moment and was obliterated. Distance collapsed. Singularity for a moment. Then beyond singularity, annihilistic decay into void beyond void.

The tape stopped and sensation crawled its way back to K, fighting tooth and nail back into his mind. He felt nauseous and his senses buzzed and vibrated sickeningly. It felt antithetical, to return to the world

of the living. It wasn't even the world of the living. It was the world of life. Of existence, of sensation. He had experienced true nothingness, for a second time.

He labeled the tape, *The Nothing*, and set it down in a shoebox among some of his other recordings.

"What happened next?" asked Billy.

"Nothing. Absolutely nothing," replied K.

"Isn't that the point? You don't hear nothing out there in the fields."

"Yeah but this was different. This was *nothing* nothing. No sound at all, no possibility of sound."

Billy seemed to think about this for a moment, taking a long, slow pull from a bottle of Grain Belt.

"You think I'm full of shit," stated K.

"What I think," started Billy, "is that you fell asleep out there in a field. Had a nightmare. Or a flashback. Or something."

"This wasn't a nightmare," K. said, defensively.

"Okay, maybe not a nightmare. Maybe you got abducted by an alien? Been listening to too much Coast to Coast AM." Billy smirked, then continued more seriously. "Maybe you just found what you were lookin' for? You went searching for silence and you found it."

"Not silence. *Nothing*. There's a difference."

"Okay okay. Let's say I believe you. Relax. What's the big deal? So, you can't hear nothin' out in the fields. Leave it be."

"The big deal is, that without sound, there's nothing else either. It all disappears. It's all gone. Everything. Everything we know, everything we see. Gone." K. had gotten progressively more animated as he spoke. "What happens if it goes? Or moves? Hell, I only got out of there because the tape stopped. I could hear my own heartbeat with the headphones against my ears. Otherwise, I'd still be out there. Or gone entirely."

Billy grasped K's shoulder. "Look. I've never seen you this wound up before. You say you've got a tape. Let me listen to it."

"I don't know. Not until I figure out how bad it is."

"Okay, well if not the tape, take me out there. Let me get a look at it."

"You can't look at it. There's nothing to look at. You see right through the spot."

Billy laughed at that. "Fair enough. Well, all the same, take me out there. I want to believe you K., but your story is crazy."

"So were the Nixon years."

"Amen to that." Billy raised his bottle.

The tall grasses beckoned to K. from under the glow of his headlights as he parked the big Buick along the road. He stepped out, slinging a large backpack over his shoulder. It was a larger bag than his usual field recording bag, and it sagged with the weight of what was inside. K. pulled out a set of foam earplugs. He donned the earplugs and set out into the field, in search of *The Nothing*. That's what he had taken to calling it. It was the only thing he could think to call it.

It took him a while to find the spot again. He knew this area like the back of his hand and his years in the Army had been spent navigating more difficult terrain than this, but finding *The Nothing* in a field full of nothing was a unique needle in a haystack scenario.

He knew it when he found it. A sense of dread, of foreboding. He stepped back immediately. The earplugs kept him focused enough to do so. Then, he set down the backpack, and removed from it a large boombox.

K. was here to test a theory.

If *The Nothing* was an absence of sound, maybe a surplus of sound, extreme sound, could negate it. K. had brought the loudest tape he had, a godawful racket which his nephew had left at his house: *Obituary, Cause of Death*.

The more he had thought about *The Nothing*, the more it worried him. This thing was dangerous, and if he had a way to get rid of it, it was his duty to do so.

K. inserted the tape into the boombox and pressed the play

button. The familiar sounds of heavy metal, muffled by the molded foam filling his ears, washed over him.

Then nothing. Or almost nothing. He could hear his heartbeat, through the thick foam. He stumbled madly, blindly. Near total sensory blindness. He was lost, deep in the ocean. Pressure, immense pressure. His sensations were a slurry of fog.

With each step, clarity gradually, begrudgingly showed itself. As his senses sharpened, he threw his legs forward more vigorously, and soon he was running as fast as he could.

The boombox. The tape. The music, the sound. It didn't hurt *The Nothing*, it grew it. He hurled the machine down, as hard as he could, before stomping on it, heavy boot falls on Japanese plastic. The music ceased.

"What's the matter Kerry?" Greta asked. "You haven't eaten a bite."

K. had been staring out the window of the diner; Greta had snapped him out of a fog.

"Just not hungry I guess," K. said.

"Well, I wouldn't feel right charging you for food you didn't eat. This one's on the house. You sure you're feeling okay, Kerry?"

"I'm fine. Just tired, is all."

"You, tired? You're a regular night owl." Greta had seated herself in the booth across from K; other than the two of them and the cook in the back, the diner was empty.

"Sleeping worse than normal," replied K.

"That's too bad. Maybe try chamomile. It worked for my aunt."

K laughed.

"I'm serious!" said Greta. "I think I have some at home. You can have it."

"I'll give it a try," replied K. He gathered his things.

"Sorry about the food."

"Like I said, just not hungry. See you later, Greta."

K. was halfway through the door when Greta spoke. "What are you doing this weekend, Kerry?"

K. stopped at the threshold, one arm grasping the doorframe and spoke. "Don't have much planned, why?"

"Me and some of the ladies from church are hosting a bake sale. You should swing by!"

"I'd like that," said K.

"Look what the cat dragged in," said Big Al. At 8:20, his forehead already glistened with a buttery sheen.

"Don't you have another line?" K. shot back.

Big Al chuckled at that and went back to his *Guns and Ammo* magazine. K. walked over to the garage bay doors and hoisted them open, one at a time. As he did so, he saw the sleek, angular form of a newer black Lincoln parked outside. The engine idled, and K. squinted in the headlights. He could just make out the silhouettes of the two men in the front seats. The passenger door opened, and the man made his way over to K.

"Mornin'," K. said, sidestepping as the man approached and oriented himself parallel to the headlights.

"Like hell it is. Power steering cut out 30 miles out of town. Had to manhandle her in. Like steering a fucking sailing ship." The man talked fast, with a barely perceptible east-coast bend. "How soon can you have it fixed?"

K. thought for a moment. "It'll depend on what's causing the issue. Few hours if we can get the replacement parts from the salvage yard in town."

"Good, we've got important business." Without consulting K, the man gestured to his compatriot to move the car into the maintenance bay. K. eyed the man up and down. He had fed written all over him. Black suit, close-cropped hair, fancy out-of-place car. The man in the driver's seat was undoubtedly his partner. K. had worked with feds once in the war; he knew they were bad news. Best fix up their wagon and get them on their way.

"Bum-fuck Egypt," said the other agent, stepping out of the vehicle. He spoke quietly, but K read it clear as day off his lips.

"Hey, you. Is there anything to eat in this town?" The agent's words were stated pointedly, impatiently.

"The diner is a few blocks down," K. said. He felt bad for Greta, sending the feds her way.

K. was halfway through installing a new power steering pump when it dawned on him. The feds were here about *The Nothing*. They probably had picked up some sort of signal at the base out near Langdon. Maybe it was further out than that. Could've been a satellite. Either way, these two men spelled out trouble.

The feds returned around 4. The two men waited around impatiently, chain smoking Marlboros and grinding the butts into the concrete of the shop floor. The closer K. got to finishing the repair, the more he wondered if he was doing the right thing, repairing their car. Either way, they'd get out there eventually. If not tonight, then tomorrow night. Or a week from now. Knowing the feds, they'd only be interested in it if they thought it was useful, or dangerous, and typically one meant the other. K. wondered if they knew how dangerous it really was.

K. sat in the driver's seat of his great old Buick, parked back in the salvage yard. He had the lights off but kept the engine idling. From the car, he could see State Route 3. This time, it wasn't so much a state of mind that he was fishing for. He had stopped by his house after work, grabbed a few things. Things he hadn't used in years. He waited for headlights. They'd appear down the road, unobstructed by buildings or trees or topography or much of anything, the eyes of a buzzard fat on carrion.

He watched as the grease smear of the black Lincoln slithered by in the dark.

Above, the stars of the firmament lit up the celestial sphere into a not-quite twilight. He counted to 60, using his shallow, measured breaths to keep the count, and then pulled out of the salvage yard and onto State Route 3, as if toward Bottineau.

He turned off on the familiar dirt road but stopped short of the old

farm road. Here, he docked the old Buick on the roadside, shutting off the engine before popping the trunk and exiting the vehicle. From the trunk, he withdrew his small field recording bag and a large-caliber rifle, which had been willed to him by his father. He had loaded the rifle with two .30-30 Winchester cartridges back at home. The rifle he slung over his shoulder, and he strapped the field recording bag about his waist. He took off his bulky Carhartt and tossed it in the backseat. He tucked the legs of his pants into his boots and tucked the length of his shirt into his pants. He held his elbow stiff at his side to keep the rifle from swaying. He focused on the rhythm of his breathing, and then disappeared into the long grass, not into tranquility, but into the maelstrom.

He stalked through the long grasses like a lithe beast of prey, slinking through the brush with catlike grace. He slipped soundlessly along, a specter beneath the mocking glow of the firmament. His quarry was quite the opposite. He could hear them from a mile away. Before he heard them, he smelled their cheap cologne and cheaper cigarettes. He crept closer, patiently flanking them, concealed by the weeds. They stood next to the Lincoln; their silhouettes burned into his retinas by the framing backlight of the hi-beams. When he was close enough to see the flames of their Marlboros, the pinprick eyes of a field mouse compared to the buzzard-eyes of the Lincoln, he unshouldered the rifle, gripping it with the firm but gentle grip of a father guiding a child out of church. When he was close enough to make out what they were saying, he paused a moment, focusing on the rhythm of his breathing.

"Ready for the fireworks?" asked one agent.

"I'm ready to get the fuck out of this field. These mosquitoes are ridiculous. At least the mosquitos down south are polite, these are fierce," said the other. "How much longer we gonna be out here anyway?"

The other agent spoke around the cigarette pinched between his canines. "Not long now. The bombers are on their way from Grand Forks Air Force Base. Short flight."

Bombers. The bombers were on the way. It reverberated through K's mind. They had no idea what they were up against. Acting reflexively,

he shot up from his position in the ditch, training the sight of the rifle on the closest agent. From this angle, he could draw down on the other with ease for a follow up shot.

“Easy,” said K.

The two men were taken by surprise, and their hands hovered briefly over their holstered weapons before begrudgingly raising into the air.

“Do you know how royally you just fucked up?” spat one of the agents.

“I could ask you the same thing,” said K. “Drop your weapons.”

“What’s your endgame here?” stated one of the agents. They were stalling, and K. knew it. Time wasn’t exactly on his side; right now, their hourglass was simmering.

“Now,” stated K.

The men complied.

“Walk twenty paces down the road. The direction you came from. Leave the car,” K said.

“You realize you’re not walking away from this, don’t you?” said one of the agents, looking over his shoulder as he shuffled down the road.

K. didn’t dignify this with a response. He planned on driving.

K. gunned the Lincoln down the farm road, opening her up and letting her eat up the gravel and dirt. He strained against the pedal, attempting to press it just the slightest bit further into the floorboard. The hourglass was beginning to boil at this point, and he knew it. He shot furtive glances toward the sky, looking with his peripheral vision for any sign of motion. As he drove, he squished a pair of foam earplugs as deep and as tight into his ear canals as possible.

They didn’t realize the magnitude of what they had ushered in. If *The Nothing* had grown from a scant few decibels of tape playing off a boombox, what would 210 decibels of high explosives do? It was pure chance that *The Nothing* hadn’t already absorbed enough sound to engulf the whole world at this point; if it had emerged anywhere else,

everyone would have been long gone.

K. reached the point where he'd normally park; he quickly pressed the brake and cut the steering wheel to the right, hurling the Lincoln over the ditch and into the uneven terrain of the field. The suspension jolted him about, slamming him violently. He cut a line through the darkness, making a beeline for where he roughly remembered *The Nothing* being.

He felt the familiar disorienting nausea. The tingling sensation of reality giving way to nonexistence. Then it was over. He had driven through it. He slammed on the brakes and flung the wheel over, spinning the Lincoln around and digging the tires into the dirt. He sat on the precipice of something unknowable, unthinkable, and antithetical.

K. shut off the engine but left the battery on. He opened the driver's side door, then reached across the center console and flung open the passenger door as well. He could hear the sound of a plane approaching. The hourglass was more than boiling at this point.

He spun the volume knob to its maximum, not knowing if it mattered, before violently feeding the tape labeled *The Nothing* into the Lincoln's cassette player.

He pressed play.

"You feel that awful earthquake last night? It shook one of my decorative plates off the wall! Who ever heard of an earthquake in North Dakota?"

Greta nodded patiently as Mrs. Walczik rambled on about the previous evening's excitement. She stood behind a large folding table covered in an assortment of cookies, pies, lefsa, and other various baked goods. The sun was bright and the day was beautiful. She shielded her eyes with a hand, gazing down 4th Street and watching for a familiar old Buick.

James North is a student veteran majoring in Commercial Aviation with a minor in Leadership and Philosophy. James currently works as a flight instructor for the university. In his spare time, he enjoys writing science fiction, cooking, and walking his wiener dog Ollie. James is currently editing a science fiction novel which he has written with hopes of getting it published.