

# **Eraser of Earth**

**By Nicholas Stillman**

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For two days Alvin wanted to leave the vegetable garden. But whenever he thought about taking that first step toward his mobile home, he'd end up standing over the peas again. It helped to just roam and snack on whatever food the plants still had. Alvin's wanderings occasionally led him back to the pea vines, perhaps as punishment for nearing the garden's edge.

The mirrored egg trapped him here, and not just via marvelment. He found the silver sphere half sunk in the parched mud by the corn. Though only fist-sized it weighed about 400 pounds, Alvin guessed. The more he'd dig around the reflective artifact, the deeper it embedded itself in the damper soil.

Having failed to lift the neutron egg, Alvin's new name for it, he considered burying his find. But Alvin had grown too attached to its pretty reflections. The device, wherever it came from, held him here no matter how sunk anyway. Besides, the garden could use such a beautiful centerpiece.

Alvin needed it more than the garden. He mainly grew food to avoid people, even cashiers at the grocery store. He'd only set utilitarian structures like stakes and wire cones for the tomatoes. The artist in him died in childhood. Everything had died. His father's brutal abuse stripped all pleasure from Alvin's life. So the stumpy garden gnomes on sale, with their broad smiles and puffy cheeks, avoided this patch of Earth. The lawn ornaments and birdbaths belonged in the neighbors' gardens, among those happier terrains.

But here lied the best art piece of all, one that trammelled the viewer. Alvin sat cross-legged before the neutron egg, gazing in. His face looked perfectly glum in it, almost static. He pondered the petty accomplishment of this little garden. Maybe he'd die in this tiny and temporary creation, the one decent thing built by Alvin's hands. And not even that would matter. The world had greater constructs.

It mattered to someone, though. The noetic sphere chose this garden in which to fall or appear or land. And it chose Alvin for company. Last night, the neutron egg permitted him to sleep on a patch of lawn at the garden's edge. His outdoor clothes got bitten hard with grass stains. So he sat on the crumbly mud now, gazing at the mirror that constellated the whole sky. Its contours collected everything. He'd stop questioning all this soon. The egg probably wanted that too.

It knew when Alvin wanted to escape and when he simply sought water. The neutron egg let him stand and meander to his watering can. The wilted plants ached for its services, but Alvin's big ape veins needed fluid more often. No standing over the peas in bewilderment this time. While guzzling from the huge metal can, a row of suited men on the lawn watched. They all wore shades like 40-year-old hipsters.

The boys in black brooded like frowning fenceposts. Their hair gel gleamed in the eight o'clock sun. The black, glossy cars snaked through Alvin's trailer park. Of course, Alvin half-expected something like this. But he anticipated white scrubs and giant butterfly nets, or a couple of troopers

checking on a patient who apparently mixed up his meds. What else would keep a man in a garden for two days straight?

But here stood eight funerals' worth of men eating gloom pie. They looked alerted when Alvin made eye contact. Some threw down their best about-to-sprint poses.

One calmer man with gray curls and too many pens in his coat lifted a bullhorn. He wore gray instead of black. Multiple agents gripped backup bullhorns. They had brought Alvin's coffee table outside to display even more bullhorns, in case the backups each got struck by lightning. Alvin knew his coffee jar in the kitchen had emptied by now.

“Alvin?” the professorial called through the bullhorn. “Can you hear me?”

“Yes!” Alvin called.

He refrained from cupping both hands around his mouth. That might resemble a gun barrel and panic the conformist chunk lords. The cordon stood behind the rickety coffee table, touching their hidden holsters or maybe just themselves. This border separated Alvin from the agents by about ten meters.

“Dr. Duffy here,” the professorly stranger called back. “You can talk normally. We've set up sound equipment to collect and amplify your words. Now I need you to stay calm and follow all instructions. As you can see, something terribly important has happened here. You must cooperate with us for the sake of international security.”

“Sure,” Alvin said.

He saw waves of relief blow over the chubby agents. Their limbs relaxed, but the spiky hair stayed up.

“Alright. Good,” Dr. Duffy said through the bullhorn. “The government selected me to talk to you because I have the most theoretical knowledge behind what has happened. We know you've stayed in your garden for a protracted 50 hours. We want to get you out, but you have to work with us.”

“Alright,” Alvin said. He took a long gulp from the watering can.

A bulldog-faced agent grabbed the doctor's arm and uttered something in his ear.

“Ok, good. Great,” Dr. Duffy said to Alvin. “Conserve that water. Just put it down and don't do anything yet.”

Alvin obeyed, setting the watering can by his squash. He hoped to avoid eating that stuff raw in three days.

“Alright,” Dr. Duffy said, almost fellating the bullhorn. He had drunk too much of Alvin's coffee. “You've done great so far. We can't get organic materials in there with you, so remain equanimous and conserve energy. Do not move toward us. Don't walk toward your house.”

“I've already tried that,” Alvin said.

“Well don't try it again!” Dr. Duffy snapped.

“Want to know what happened?”

“Yes. Give specific details.”

“Nothing. Nothing happened. I keep thinking about going inside, and I always end up waiting around.”

“Come on, Alvin, I need specific details.”

“I stand over the snow peas wishing I could go inside. It's happened dozens of times. I sleep on the lawn, live off the vegetables I've grown, and urinate in a hole I dug. Sometimes I stand by the tomatoes wishing I could leave the garden. Or I stand by the corn. Or the potatoes. Or the strawberries. But I haven't gone inside yet for some reason.”

“I think I have the explanation,” Dr. Duffy's voice boomed through the bullhorn. He looked to one of the old polar bear men as if for permission. The chubby face nodded, and the doctor continued. “We believe you *have* walked away, toward your house or otherwise, but a sort of field surrounds most of the garden. When you cross that field you...get taken back to the point before you started. This barrier of sorts, well, it bounces you and everything back to when your premotor cortex chose to move. But you keep choosing the wrong direction and destination—to and through the field.”

“Like time travel,” Alvin said.

“Yes. We believe so. That means you must forget about walking anywhere. It will send back not only you, but everything. For all we know, you disobeyed me a hundred times already and reset our meeting. Maybe you saw all these officials on your lawn and ran. But my memory says you've listened well for at least five minutes. Hopefully, that happened. So don't do anything without my guidance. Can you promise me that, Alvin?”

“Ok. By the way, I gave up trying to escape a long time ago.”

“You wouldn't remember the thousands of times you moved through the field,” Dr. Duffy said. “Your memory of the journey, the steps, the calories, your desperate lunges, all gets erased. The whole Earth for sure gets erased, and maybe the known universe. Then, it all reassembles mindbogglingly fast, but just to the time you started thinking about leaving. Over the last two days, the path you took to stay within the field assembled from those rare times you chose not to leave. Whenever you stand by those plants thinking about going somewhere, you had already gone. Time just keeps starting over, giving you endless chances to choose otherwise.”

“Imagine standing over a frying pan about to crack an egg. But you get the shivers, a scruple, déjà vu, or you think about your taxes, and that causes a little delay. A fly buzzes past, and you look at it. The universe keeps throwing those little distractions at you to keep that egg from cracking. It just stays in your hand forever. Time keeps resetting until a string of scruples, déjà vu's, or flies happen to go by in perpetuity.”

“Well shit,” Alvin said.