

# **Jackpack City**

**By Nicholas Stillman**

Sample chapters

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Brian invented the backpack in 2028. It held all the attachments that decorate a patient in his final months: intravenous and feeding bags, their lines and battery-powered pumps, surgical drains, an oxygen tank, and even Foley catheters and collection bags. A new pump came out which moved urine against gravity, intended for hospital use only. The backpack simply crammed everything into a manageable, portable box worn on the back. Some of Brian's clients had hunchbacks, but his 3D printer could build a custom-fit casing for anyone. He broke many laws to extend clients' lives and mobility, and none of them knew his last name.

One law, though, made Brian's business possible: the Open Exit policy. Since 2026 doctors could no longer brand patients “certified” and force them to stay hospitalized. The moral crusaders had whined their loudest about patients' rights. Any patient now, even the most confused or delirious, could walk, wheel, or crawl out. And they did, in mass. And Brian slipped his business card to the shamblers who didn't die or get picked up by family. He had the tubes and bags needed for them to live outside the system. They'd call for a backpack or die in the streets.

They died with a backpack too, but it took damned long. Commuters preferred patients to fall over quickly and closer to the hospital. Everyone knew the government had to cut spending, and Open Exit kicked the can to the moon. But then Brian appeared and turned the city streets and parks into psych wards without walls. The health system kept all its pet humans alive past age 100, and Brian's invention stretched the decline further.

Citizens, then, had to dodge more odious patients lying or shuffling in the streets. When the police collected the dead ones, they often took the backpacks for their great grandparents to use. Other entrepreneurs probably started selling by now. They'd never fill the demand. While waiting in his van, Brian wondered about the thousand or more backpacks sold by him alone, and their uglification of the city. Then, he got a call.

“Yes?” he answered.

Panicked garble came out the cellphone. It sounded gurgly, inhuman. Brian had a customer.

“Alright, why don't I pick you up for some quick measurements?” Brian said. He knew how to feign enthusiasm without fake-smiling anymore. “We can get everything you need for portability so you can have your freedom back. No charge for this first visit and questionnaire, of course. I'll need you to meet me at the corner of South and Tower. We'll sort out the total cost then, if you chose our service.”

*We. Our.* Of course, Brian worked alone.

More gut-wrenching, phlegm-filled noise pelted its way out the cellphone. Brian winced and tried to translate.

“Yes,” Brian said. He had no idea what the gargling thing on the other end had asked. It rarely mattered. “I'll need you to go to the corner of South and Tower. Just around the corner of the

hospital.”

The creature boomed more of whatever it had to say. A lifelong glut of meds had created another ball of anxiety and deafness. Half a century of pampering built the purest narcissism and fussiness. Brian heard it all stitched together so gruesomely.

“I’ll need you to go…” Brian repeated.

The new client hobbled into the back of the van, almost swaying over with each step. His walker made it in afterwards. Another zombie death corpse. Each hoary patient looked like porridge with bones in it. They wore diapers and hospital gowns called johnny shirts. This one sported a flannel coat too. The centenarian hollered, croaking gibberish. He could use a medical muzzle, but those still needed inventing. Brian pictured the browned, shrunken brain in there, shriveled and ravaged with ugly trenches. Dead clay. You can't really talk to dead clay, no matter how wet the doctors keep it.

The patient waved a stack of cash at him, more than the price of a jackpack setup as advertised on Brian's business card. Brian took the money and seated the new client. He got to work strapping a generic jackpack onto the client's spotty back. This zombie had only the basics: a feeding line in his abdomen and an IV site still taped on one forearm.

The client started playing with the new IV line that suddenly draped over his knee. Brian sighed. His clients' fossilized brains made them grab and pull at things forever until they die. He knew the fidgeting would become thrashing as more inhibitory neurons died. Daily heaps of geriatric drugs fried the brain circuitry. Shitty diet destroyed the rest.

“Here, I’ll fix that,” Brian shouted.

Brian hid the tube behind his client and lifted a bundle of Christmas lights off a nearby hook. He dropped the tangled mess of wire into the skeletal hands. The bones clung and explored.

“I need you to hold this,” Brian hollered.

The client already entangled all his fingers in the wires. Brian had removed the bulbs because patients will break anything. They even tried ripping the sockets off the dark green wire. This disaster man did the same. Only feebleness prevented them from pulling off a jackpack. Feebleness and tough nylon.

The open jackpack shifted left and right as the patient enmeshed himself further. They always pulled harder, trying to snap whatever objects lie near. Brian stirred awkwardly to finish attaching the slow-drip IV and feeding bags. He knew better than to plea for the clients to “stop, stop! STOOOOOOOOP!” Their memories reset every few seconds.

“Do you smoke?” Brian asked slowly at triple loudness. Of course, he could tell. Wheezes and crackly lungs from last year's clients still tortured his ears. The smokers breathed noisily and

cleared nothing.

The client croaked his life story about smoking and his life mission to continue smoking. It became a matter of pride some decades ago.

Brian deciphered little of it. Instead, he found the right key on his keychain by rote and opened a trunk full of cigarette cartons. One hand whisked away the bundle of Christmas lights, and the other dropped a carton into the grasping bones.

“Here,” Brian yelled. “Free gift.” He minimized syllables. Less to repeat for the deafer ones, meaning all of them.

Some clients, like this one, had a pocketful of lighters spread out in their clothes. They channeled God through smoking. This client would smoke five in a row two steps out of the van.

Brian knew his little gift would kill the old man sooner. But the mobility, the exercise he provided, would add more days of life than those lost from smoking. Heck, the hospitals hired servants to escort smokers, most of them wheelchair-bound, outside for their chain-smoking rituals. A good backpack provider sped up the luxury and slowed down the suicide.

*Suicide, heh, Brian thought. I meant “lifestyle choices.” It sounds so much better, we all agree. We wouldn't want to quit our “lifestyle choices.”*

The client will call again for expensive backpack refills...but really for more smokes. Store clerks didn't have the time or patience to translate. But Brian knew how to work with dead mouth parts. He, at least, could feign patience and scream politely into hearing aids.

Most times, though, nothing worked. He had given up screaming at rocks at his old hospital job, and longed to quit this one too. The stress of constant futility and forced attempts, the stream of predictable impossibilities, followed him to situations like this. The crumpled senior attempted to uncrumple himself, and Brian knew what that meant. Patients don't defecate; they explode. And most believe they'll die unless the diarrhea gets to explode out right away.

This client stood by seesawing first to build momentum. He gripped his walker, and the front of it reared up like a skeletal horse. Finally, he rose, loosening a splatter of gas. Brian had, by this stage in his career, seen all this hundreds of times.

“Alright, all done,” Brian hollered. He snapped the backpack closed and opened the back doors of his van. “Call for refills in four days. You have my card. Here, take two more.” Brian slipped one into each flannel pocket. They jostled in there with the lighters.

Brian wanted to move boxes for a living. He longed to mop shit off a floor. Shit doesn't move or make horrible noises. Working with inanimate objects became his deepest fantasy.

Later that morning, though, he loitered in the hospital parking lot to watch all the mush piles leaving. Gray mush entered. White mush left. Brian needed mush still gray that also left. They had

legs, some of them, that could support a backpack.

From his van, he watched for any patient half upright to leave the main entrance. Something close enough wobbled outside. Too much corpse dust on that one. Later, another bolted out and turned to stone in the fresh wind. This woman had death wrinkles. She looked like overcooked steak up to the eyes. Brian didn't set up females. They left the hospital as piles of bones and veins, often having less muscle mass to start with relative to males. Plus, women called too often, collapsed sooner, and their papery skin tore easily.

Another skeleton left in slow motion. Dammit, Brian needed to go home and watch tennis or something.

Brian shuddered all morning, fixated on those sliding doors. He had buried himself in apathy after nine years of night shifts in the crumbling hospitals. Night, day, it meant nothing to the crypt fanatics nor the moaning bones that entertained them. He'd watch family surround their pet human and throw a sick party, often followed by a death party. They encircled the skeleton, yearning to watch the last bowel movement dribble out, hear the last gurgly breath, smile at the thrashing, guess at its thoughts, and encourage the phlegm coughing. They'd obsess over the phlegm amounts, the crime of dry lips, the boluses forced in, and the urine measured out.

They wished for the nurses to teleport in, or for a 24-hour doctor at the bedside. They'd wish for a golden scepter forced into their relative's skeletal hand, and a bejeweled crown set upon the gargling, thrashing head. For liters of high-end water got pumped into the patients, and the system needed newer ways to spend money on death.

But mostly, the sightseers prayed. Brian remembered it something like this:

Magic Jesus, yes or no?

Magic Jesus, go go go.

Magic ashes, magic dust.

Forces of Jesus, cradle the rust.

Great old Jesus, take you sword.

Kill the devil and the hoard.

Magic sin and magic light,

Magic Jesus, make it right.

Jesus anchor in my heart,

Jesus take this good old fart.

Magic stuff and magic woes,

Magic Jesus, I don't know.

Magic Lord, call the wind.

Let us all magic binge.

Magic God, keep it goin',  
All the life stuff you bestowin'.  
Don't forget thy kingdom come.  
Jesus Christ, give us some.

Brian remembered the crowdedness of the zombie death towers, caused by all the clunky contraptions. Wheelchairs, walkers, hydraulic patient lifts, IV poles, and commodes would box in the 300 pound nurses. Workers couldn't keep their legs crossed for long. One near-corpse needed all those devices, a roomful of padded junk. Humanity progressed from canes, to two canes, to walkers with seats, to motorized wheelchairs, to beds with wheels. It all ended in ICU with servants moving each floppy limb. But death only began there, and the rooms enlarged to pack in machines.

Some derelicts, though, had enough of the rooms. So another one slipped outside, moving like a disgusting broth solidified. He looked big, big as in potbellied. This one made dust all day. Perfect. Brian left his van and approached him. Maybe loud enough shouting would vibrate a few neurons.

“Do you need affordable, hands-off care?” Brian hollered into the patient's wrecked eyes.

Stone deaf. Of course. Stone deaf and river blind. The patient also stank in various ways. Brian refused to yell at a face without senses. He decided not to slip him a business card, and instead, just call it a year. No more new clients.

Brian peered through the glass doors a final time. He saw the bodies eloping from their rooms. They floated around the hospital like wraiths, doing the graveyard shuffle. The deathly origami roamed the building, allergic to beds—and chairs hurt them.

Brian returned to his squalid van. It had that stink of dead skin cells that never slough off and the inside of a client's mouth. Brian grew tired of it all, and of carrying a toothache around in his mouth. But this afternoon, he'd at least do something about the latter.

Brian entered the dental office hoping the stench of clients had faded. He had changed into a fresh set of clothes stored in his van. Three garbage bags kept the smell off them. However, the fecal particles often went deep and lingered in the lungs. Adding to the embarrassment, the girly dental hygienist had a gorgeous face and probably never smelled death before. She also had enough roundness to name a sport after her.

Her black scrubs swayed like wheat as she led Brian to the dentist chair. A big window overlooked the sprawling cemetery below. The crumbly tombstones reminded him of clients' wrinkles. In this city, the gravestones walk around.

The appointment gave relief from Brian's daily grind. He'd take the grind of dental instruments any day. The hygienist had such strong little fingers. Brian wondered if, somewhere in her nerd

brain, she wanted a massage. Some higher-up dentist drilled and filled his wisdom tooth, then asked him why he avoided dentist visits for so long.

*Because it costs goddamn money,* Brian thought. But he told her something else.

Brian's cellphone rang. He hated answering it, and for a moment, contemplated suicide. Warmer thoughts of an upcoming economic collapse gave him the strength to press the phone to his ear.

“Hell?” he said. “I mean hello?”

A gruff authoritarian voice said, “Identify yourself.” Brian could even hear a mustache.

“Excuse me?” Brian replied.

He knew already. A cop.