

## Laid-Back

Ever since high school, or perhaps even earlier, Zach Lessup had been known as “Lessup the Fuck-Up.” How he had managed to graduate high school was to this day unclear, for it was only on the rarest of occasions he’d been known to turn in a completed assignment or demonstrate he grasped even the rudiments of a lesson. In sports he never caught the ball, his writing compositions seemed to blithely disdain any semblance of coherency or reason, and his science fair experiments had induced grave philosophical doubts in his teachers about the reliability of the entire empirical enterprise. Therapists and guidance counselors had thrown up their hands, girlfriends left him in exasperation, parents yelled and berated, employers shown him the door, friends told him to buzz off and stay scarce. Somehow this slightly heavy-set Nebraska lad with blond hair and freckles seemed to embody the genius of pure incompetence. The secret of Zach’s failure? What his high school career counselor had termed “an almost uncanny lack of basic competency or motivation” in his private notes.

Zach didn’t stress. He’d strive for anything because there’s nothing to strive for when your life’s already a breeze, and always will be. His only brush with something resembling a career plan had been a short-lived effort in his mid-twenties to pitch an educational children’s program called *The Robby Romp Show* to television executives in Los Angeles.

He’d only gotten one meeting, to which he had shown up in jeans and a mustard-stained T-shirt (and sans any scripts, outlines, or conceptual materials).

“So this guy Robby,” he began, pacing about the executive’s office, “he’s, like, the mayor of Rompville... Or no, he’s running to *be* mayor, against this chick Norma, who’s always, like, pissed off – no sense of humor, always got her arms crossed, like this... right? Anyway, Rompville’s like – I don’t know, a bunch of kids and toys and bright colors and cardboard castles, cutout trees, that kind of shit, ya know? Sure. And there’s ’70s-style theme music at the start, funky rhythms, and the announcer’s all like: ‘And now, boys and girls, it’s... *The Robby Romp Show!* Starring...’ and there’s a long pause here... ‘Robby Romp!’

“Puppets! Lots of puppets, that’s the emphasis. Dancing to kids’ songs, saying stuff that has to be bleeped out, whatever. Stuff puppets do. One of

'em, Wilbur, is a real wise-ass, and the kids are always beating him up with, like, these padded bats. That'll be great.

“So Robby’s a real cool character: I mean both that he’s hip and he doesn’t let anything get to him. Cool dude. Big shock of white hair, like he’s just been electrocuted, and maybe these dark Ray-Bans he’s always wearing. He’s got two bodyguards, the Rompettes, and they’re like maybe Russian – they’ve got these submachine guns and smoke cigarettes in holders and wear those sexy Russian soldier uniforms for girls, ya know? And they always have this supermodel expression, really serious, sorta like, *I zon’t tink you vant to fuck vit me, baby*. And meanwhile Robby keeps goin’ on about how great his puppet shows are during his speeches, and all the kids have to listen to ’im ’cause he’s the emperor.”

“Wait... emperor?” asked the woman executive. “I thought he was running for mayor.”

“Oh yeah,” said Zach. “It’s gonna be a rigged election, definitely.”

Zach had made his way back to his parents’ house outside Beatrice, Nebraska not long after this meeting. Now, aged thirty-one and kicked out of the only domicile he’d ever known after losing his job at the local Socks ’n Such for chatting too much with friends and customers, Zach faced the daunting prospect (in theory, anyway) of securing both steady employment and a decent place to live. But he wasn’t stressed. Between couch-surfing, odd jobs, food pantries, loans from friends, and long hours spent zoning out at the library, Zach Lessup would get by just fine. Life was a breeze.

One Wednesday morning in the spring of 1997, fortune found Zach sipping coffee and eating peach pie in a diner in Beatrice, and just so happened to guide his eye toward something interesting in the disused copy of the local newspaper he’d picked up from a nearby booth. He’d been half-listening to a news announcer on the television behind the counter talk about some rash of unusual meteorites which had fallen across the Midwest a few days ago – as well as some vague rumors about curious parties being turned away from looking for the space rocks by unidentified officials – when a faint stirring of something resembling a sense of responsibility began tugging at Zach, and with a sigh he turned from the funnies to the classifieds to hunt half-heartedly for work. His gaze wandered lazily until it was drawn to the following ad in the middle of the page:

ARE YOU CALM AND LAID-BACK?  
DON’T LET ANYTHING GET TO YOU?

ALWAYS STEADY UNDER PRESSURE?  
LOOKING FOR SOME EXTRA MONEY?

COME TO  
755 N. 20½ ST. SUITE D LINCOLN, NE  
10 AM – 1:30 PM THURSDAY APRIL 10  
MUST BE AT LEAST 18 YEARS OLD

\$100 GUARANTEED FOR TAKING SHORT TESTS  
YOU CAN EARN \$900 FOR ONE DAY OF WORK IF SELECTED!

*Hot damn*, thought Zach. *That's tomorrow. Perfect.* Lincoln was some forty miles away, but he had almost enough money for bus fare there and back. Maybe the staff here at the diner needed some help washing dishes or something...

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It was about eleven-thirty the next day, and North 20½ Street was dusty and desolate. A cluster of semi-dilapidated cars parked on both sides of the street about halfway down the block flashed sharply in the sunlight, making Zach squint.

He found the address, then the door – Suite D. He grinned and went in confidently. The inside was dark and dingy, illuminated only by one newspapered window. Zach figured this must have been a storeroom or something, decades ago.

A receptionist of sorts, an elderly woman with auburn-tinted hair done up in old-fashioned victory rolls, sized up Zach from behind her card table as he approached. Without a word, she handed him a golf pencil and a one-page application. About two or three dozen folks – farm people, college students, assorted under- and unemployed riffraff – were sitting on an assortment of folding chairs, slightly more comfortable padded seats, and some old fraying sofas and loveseats. It seemed a strange, hastily-arranged affair, even to Zach's disheveled mind.

“So, what's up?” he asked as he started filling out the form. “What's the job?”

“Can't tell you, son,” said the woman.

Zach looked at her. “Can't tell me?”

“Sworn to secrecy,” she said, and chuckled. “Actually, they didn’t tell me much. I just take the forms.” She had a thick Midwestern accent.

Zach shrugged. “Hm.”

He finished the application and sat down between a fat, nearly comatose man in overalls and a thin, nervous old woman in natty clothes who was half bald and smelled of menthol cigarettes. It was a bit warm in the room, and Zach unzipped his jacket.

He nudged the woman, who didn’t seem particularly calm or laid-back.

“You know what this is?” Zach asked softly.

The woman tilted toward him. “I – I think we’re doing some psychological t-tests or something.” Her voice was jittery. “Like, it’s part of an experiment.”

“Well, what’s the work we’re testing for?” asked Zach. “Like, the \$900 job?”

The woman shrugged. “Don’t know.”

Zach looked around. “Am I waiting behind all these people to take the test?”

“Some went already,” the woman said. “Not me, though. They’re just waiting t-to see if they got selected.”

Zach talked more with the woman, who seemed to have heard that only one person was going to be chosen for the more lucrative bit of work, whatever it was. The conversation trailed off and Zach folded his arms and stared at the ceiling, wishing he’d brought a *MAD* magazine or something.

One by one, applicants were called into a backroom for testing. The woman didn’t have to wait very long, and Zach’s turn came about forty minutes after she was called. In the backroom, at a desk, a cute woman in her early twenties wearing jeans and a violet blouse explained the tests Zach would take: free association, the Rorschach inkblot test, and a measurement of his physiological reactions to loud noises and a clip from a horror movie.

*Remember, they want someone laid-back, he thought. You’re the king of that – just be yourself.*

The free association test began:

“Rat,” read the woman from a list of words.

“Mouse,” said Zach.

“Blood,” she read.

“Tomato,” said Zach.

“Disease.”

“Stay home from school.”

The woman looked at him. “Remember, one word only.”

“Right, sorry,” said Zach. “Should I try that one again?”

“We’ll move on,” she said. “Impalement.”

“Shish kabob,” said Zach. “Wait... is that two words?”

In his interpretation of the inkblots, Zach described landscapes of idyllic serenity, populated by benign characters of whimsy and winsomeness, many of them the never-realized puppets of *The Robby Romp Show*. For the two stress tests, the woman wrapped a blood pressure monitor around his arm and, to Zach’s moderate glee, insinuated a heart rate pad between his shirt buttons. She disappeared for a few minutes while a screeching, piercing noise emanated by intervals from somewhere in the ceiling. *Must be a soundproof room*, thought Zach with surprise. *Woulda heard that in the lobby*. He just imagined he was relaxing on the beach.

For the last test, on a TV the woman played a grainy clip from an obscure ’80s horror movie in which giant slugs smashed through the windows of a country house and consumed the family of four that had just sat down to dinner. Zach chuckled in disbelief at the rubbery, groaning slugs. *One hundred bucks – this is great. Wonder what the nine hundred dollar job will be.*

The woman removed the pads. The tests had taken about fifteen minutes.

“Just one question before we’re done, Mr. Lessup,” she said, picking up her clipboard. “What are your current living arrangements? Do you live alone?”

“Well... I’m sorta trying to stay rent-free these days,” said Zach. “I move around a lot. Later this afternoon I’m gonna call my friend Glenny to see if I can keep staying at his place. Why do you...”

“Thanks,” said the woman. “We’ll be distributing cash and announcing the result shortly. Please have a seat in the other room again.”

Zach sat again between the comatose man and the nervous woman. Two or three more people were called to the back. Then the woman appeared carrying envelopes and her clipboard, which she set on the receptionist’s desk.

“Zach Lessup,” she called out, and started handing out everyone’s pay. There were a few grumbles, but the crisp twenties helped smooth over the room’s disappointment. Zach was beaming. He went up to the young woman and stuffed the envelope in his pocket.

“Congrats,” she said. “Can you remain right here? Take a seat. We’re going to need you right away.”

“Sure, sure,” said Zach.

Soon all the others had left. Zach drummed on his outer thighs while bobbing his head and mumbling the scattered lyrics of some pop song he’d heard on a radio. The young woman and the receptionist were headed toward the backroom.

“Be back in a minute,” said the young woman.

The door shut, and it was perfectly silent – not so much as a passing car could be heard. Zach looked around the dim room. Shadows lurked in every corner, beneath every table. Dust motes floated like tiny organisms in the muted sunlight streaming in from the one window.

Zach shifted uneasily. *What an eerie silence.*

He sniffed. There was some strange odor in the air, faint but undeniable.

Zach’s head began to swim. He wasn’t sure what happened next.

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With bleary eyes, Zach saw chairs, desks, shelves, books, potted plants, tubs and containers, colorful posters. A dangling American flag loomed above him. He glanced around. He was in a classroom – elementary school, from the looks of it – and was seated at one of the children’s desks. One of his cheeks was wet with drool, and he rubbed it with his sleeve.

A flickering television set was perched on the desk one row in front of him. To Zach’s astonishment, the screen showed the receptionist and the younger woman from Suite D standing against a dark background. Somehow, they appeared very different to him now. They stared at Zach with stiff expressions, almost like robots.

“Hello, Zach,” said the older woman. “Welcome back to consciousness.”

Zach studied the screen. “Huh? You can see me?”

“Of course,” said the woman. “There’s a camera on top of the set in front of you.”

Zach noticed the miniature camera, then gave his surroundings another glance around. “What happened? The last thing I…”

“You fell asleep,” said the older woman. “Been getting enough rest lately, honey? You should always get at least eight hours of sleep a night, you know. Anyway, we took you where you’ll be working.”

Zach was baffled. “Why didn’t you just wake me?”

“You were out pretty cold,” said the woman. “It looked like you needed the rest. It wasn’t any trouble for us.”

Zach sat there, scratching his head. *Not a receptionist after all. What’s the deal?*

The older woman began: “Here’s what you’ll be doing...”

“What time is it?” said Zach.

“Hm?” She looked at her watch. “Three-twenty.”

“Same day?”

“Of course. Thursday. I think there’s a clock over your head.” Zach craned his neck.

“You’re a few miles outside of Lincoln,” added the younger woman. “We’re not too far away from you.”

“Why do you have to be on TV?” asked Zach. “I mean, why couldn’t...”

“Just standard procedure,” said the older woman.

“We have a lot of people we need to talk to at the same time,” said the younger.

“Here’s what you’ll be doing,” began the older woman again. She pointed to Zach’s left, and he noticed a glass of clear liquid on a nearby desk.

“We’re testing...”

“Who are you guys, anyway?” asked Zach.

“We’re a drug company,” said the older woman, perfectly patient.

“Working in conjunction with the federal government,” added the younger.

“We’re testing the effects of a new, experimental hallucinogen on B-type personalities in various environments,” said the older.

“Such as the classroom you’re in,” said the younger.

“Something that might remind people of their childhood, in this case,” said the older.

Zach looked at them blankly. “Okay.”

The older woman gestured again. “The hallucinogen is mixed into the water. Please, help yourself.”

Hesitating, Zach leaned over, clutched the moist glass, and downed about half the drink.

“All of it,” said the woman.

Zach drained the glass.

“The effect won’t be immediate,” said the younger woman. “Expect hallucinations within an hour or two.”

“A sense of serenity and wellbeing will be a side effect,” said the older woman. “We’ll be watching your behavior. You’ll notice a second camera, resting on the bookshelf right behind the teacher’s desk.” Zach looked, located it. A cord ran from the camera to the floor, then underneath the door that led outside.

“We’ll also ask you to describe your experiences after the drug runs its course,” said the younger woman.

“And then I get the nine hundred dollars?” said Zach. He felt to make sure his envelope was still in his pocket.

“Yes,” said the older woman. “Please stay in this room if you can, though you may go outside if you strongly feel the need to roam around. We have cameras stationed there, too. All the other classrooms are locked. Please, under no circumstances leave the school grounds. We have to record your behavior... All clear?”

“I think so. So I just hang out?”

The woman smiled. “Yes. You just hang out.”

“Some of the hallucinations may be intense,” said the younger woman. “Even unsettling or disturbing. Just remember that none of it is real.”

“Can do,” said Zach.

“We’ll be switching off now,” said the older woman. “There’s a bathroom behind you if you need it. And we left some sandwiches on the counter near the sink.”

“We’ll be very interested to hear about what you experience,” said the younger woman. “Best of luck.”

The set switched off abruptly. Zach sat still as a stone for a moment, then started flipping switches and pushing buttons to see if he could get any of the cartoons he liked to watch in the afternoon when he could. It was nothing doing.

For a while he just slumped in his seat, trying to sense if anything funny was going on yet with his perceptions, but he didn’t notice anything. Soon he started wandering around the classroom, rummaging through the drawers of the teacher’s desk and her file cabinet, riffling through the books on the shelves, spinning the globe, eating some sandwiches, making airplanes out of construction paper.



In mid-antics, he stopped short, thinking: *Wasn't this a school day? It's only a little after four... Are any teachers still around? Did they pay the school to use this place? Funny that those two couldn't just wait till the weekend if they needed to use a classroom.*

*Strangest day of my life. Still nothing happening with the drug... I should've asked them how long till this is all over, I gotta call Glenny soon.*

Zach was feeling more and more relaxed and serene now, as promised. His stomach was still grumbling, so he ate two more sandwich halves – ham and cheese this time.

He sat down at the teacher's desk (which apparently belonged to a Mrs. Della, according to a little plaque perched there), looked over a framed photo of her family, and then began assigning insane amounts of homework to imaginary students who'd arrived late or forgotten to bring anything for show-and-tell. Growing bored with that game, Zach next picked up the teacher's edition of a history textbook called *Dawn's Early Light* and opened it at random:

*In the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, European adventurers began exploring the New World discovered by Columbus. These daring seafarers came in search of gold, spices, and a route to the exquisite wealth of Asia which lay even farther to the west. But the thrill of voyaging into the unknown, and a desire to convert the natives of the newly-discovered continents to Christianity, were also powerful motivations which filled their ships' sails with the winds of enthusiasm.*

Zach looked up from reading. He hadn't heard anything – at least, he didn't think he had – but somehow he felt compelled to peer out through the tall, slender window beside the door.

He got up and stared at an apple orchard stretching beyond the asphalt path that ran beside the building. The branches and leaves swayed, but Zach saw nothing unusual.

He turned back toward the teacher's desk – but stopped. In the utter quiet, he could now hear a vague, sustained sound coming from outside – a sort of buzzing, but with an odd, unearthly ringing, or perhaps singing, quality to it. Zach went slowly to the door again. He opened it slightly to hear better, letting in a light breeze that blew on his face. The hairs were standing up all over his skin.

Amid the trees, something was moving. An uncanny sensation, such as Zach could recollect only dimly from the most infrequent of childhood dreams, coursed through his nerves.

The sound was growing louder. From behind the apples and leaves and branches and trunks, some large object was sliding into view: it was imposing, broad, shiny grey, probably metallic. At first Zach thought it must be a tractor, or some other kind of vehicle...

But the object didn't have wheels – it was *floating* over the ground, hovering above it by at least a foot. The metal hulk – a kind of upright slab, it became clear – had no windows or other features, except for one which suddenly made Zach's heart race like he'd never felt before.

Crowning the slab was a fixture, also made of the grey metal, in the shape of a human head, complete with indications of eyes, ears, nose, and a mouth. The strange entity bobbed slightly as it made its way over dips and bumps in the ground between two rows of apple trees. The metal face didn't move, but seemed to stare at Zach – holding him with a bizarrely ferocious expression.

Without even thinking, Zach slammed the door shut, found to his horror that it required a key to be locked, then dashed into the classroom's supply closet and pressed his shoulder against the door to secure it. In the darkness he felt for a light switch.

Flicking it on, he held still and tried to calm his breathing to hear clearly. All that came to his ears for several minutes was the hum of silence.

*Hey – relax, you chowderhead!* he thought suddenly. *Did you forget you're on a hallucinogen?*

*I guess for a minute or two there I did,* he answered himself. *It's just that I wasn't expecting something so... convincing.*

Zach kept listening. To his dismay, the buzzing-singing noise emerged again. It seemed to be coming from just outside the classroom – and now, eerily, it was approaching the closet, as though the entity had passed through the door without the least squeak of the hinges.

Zach shut his eyes. *It's all in your mind!*

The sound, like warbling from the throat of some unholy musical machine, came closer until it seemed to halt and hold its place. Zach kept his shoulder tight against the door, his feet planted firmly, trying not to breathe any more deeply than he had to. After what must have been at least fifteen minutes in the increasingly stuffy air, he swung the door wide and leapt out.

All alone.

*Snap out of it, stupid!*

Zach let out a deep breath. He sat down at a desk, noticing how damp with sweat his shirt had gotten.

It unnerved him to think what he might see next. Nothing seemed worse than the prospect of sitting in this silent classroom, unable to avoid glancing toward the window and the unlocked door every few seconds.

Zach went outside. The orchard was empty. At his feet, he noticed that a cord from the television set became bundled at the door's threshold with the cord from the camera on the bookshelf behind Mrs. Della's desk: both cords ran across the asphalt and disappeared into the orchard.

The wind blew, rising and falling. Zach stuffed his hands in his pockets, wishing his jacket were thicker. He looked around. The sun was a bit low in the sky now, the horizon growing orange.

The elementary school was a complex of six or seven buildings with a playground in the middle of them, surrounded on three sides by orchards and on the fourth by a lonely, pockmarked road, beyond which stretches of tall corn waved in the breeze. The road was perfectly quiet. Wandering the grounds, Zach rubbed his arms to warm them. He sat in one of the playground swings and pushed himself to and fro with his feet. He looked around for the cameras the women had mentioned, but figured they were too small and well-hidden.

*I had a scare there, but I'm back to feeling mellow, he thought. Just a figment of the noggin, that strange... thing. Wonder how long till they fetch me. They didn't say, did they? I'll sure have a story to tell 'em.*

*Is this how LSD or magic mushrooms or whatever usually work? Never tried that stuff before... But they said this stuff was new. Maybe the hallucinations from it are more sporadic. It's weird – I feel perfectly normal. Aside from seeing that – whatever-it-was – nothing else feels strange.*

Soon Zach got up and peered into the classroom windows one by one – they were all empty. He tried the doors, but they were indeed all locked. He made his way back to the room he'd been in: on the outside of the door was stenciled 'Room A5.' He used the restroom, drank some water from the sink, polished off the sandwiches, then sat again in Mrs. Della's chair, putting his feet up on the desk and closing his eyes. He felt so calm and laid-back he fell asleep.

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A harsh silver light was pouring into the classroom through the window. Zach's eyes opened wide. The eerie buzzing had returned. He could feel his heart trembling and shaking in his chest like an overworked motor.

The dark sky showed it was night, but the glowing was intense – and it seemed to be strengthening, as was the noise. That horrible, uncanny, dreamlike feeling had again come over him, and he couldn't move.

On the asphalt path outside, a dark, anthropomorphic figure with long limbs stepped into view. Its oversized head glowed like a bulging, moon-silver lightbulb.

Zach's nerves went electric, jolting him out of his paralysis. He scampered again into the closet, once more pressing his shoulder against the door. This time he turned the light switch *off*.

Again the buzzing grew louder, proceeding smoothly into the classroom.

*You're just imagining it!* Zach kept whispering to himself. He took deep, rapid breaths and calmed down a little.

The sound seemed to hover in the middle of the room. Slowly, Zach was coming back to himself. There was nothing to be afraid of.

*Hey – why not have a look at it?* he thought. *Give your employers their money's worth.*

Steadying himself, huffing, Zach got ready. After a moment, he set back his shoulders, opened the door calmly, and stared into the silver light, holding his breath.

For years afterwards, Zach would struggle to explain to himself what he had seen amid that light. In the lonely room of memory, he could only recall a feeling of such monumental, overwhelming terror that he must have nearly fainted. He may have screamed, but he didn't think he did. He only knew that within a few seconds, a burst of flame had erupted in front of him, and a singeing heat spread instantly over his face, neck, and hands while a terrifying, screeching roar assaulted his ears. The building shook, the windows blew out, and a section of the roof shattered into a thousand pieces. A shockwave of air threw him to the floor, and with the impact to his head, Zach really did lose consciousness.

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In a derelict warehouse several miles from the school, amid banks of computers and maps and a constant bustle of scientists, agents, and soldiers,

the elderly woman with victory rolls, clad in a white coat, was speaking before a small group of doctors and psychologists who'd been newly recruited by the secret government agency of which she was the director.

On a huge display screen behind her was shown a map of the United States, across which were sprinkled some two dozen orange dots and a larger number of red dots, most of them in the Midwest. The younger woman was seated at a computer not far away.

"The points in orange indicate all known locations where the Entities landed in the invasion of '53," explained the director, "while the red ones are where this second wave landed just five days ago. All 1953 sites were eventually evacuated and isolated once the threat was understood in Washington, while the sites impacted last Sunday have been handled much more rapidly, with similar protocols.

"We can track the Entities as they approach Earth due to their friction with the atmosphere," she continued, "but they leave no evidence of impact on the ground and, as far as we understand, are not even usually visible or otherwise detectable. Based on our experiences of forty-four years ago, as well as input from partnering governments, it seems that they only adopt a visible form for someone who remains in their 'landing area' for at least an hour or so. Like the ant lion, they keep hidden in one spot, waiting for unwitting prey to come to them."

The director nodded to the younger woman, who tapped at her keyboard. The screen now ran through images of corpses on gurneys and examination tables, covered up to the neck with sheets and blankets.

"These are the victims of the Entities," said the director, "both those from '53, and some of our test subjects from the past few days."

Some of the images were in black and white, most in color. The recruits shifted and squirmed. The raised hair on the heads of the corpses was bone-white, and wide-eyed expressions of supreme terror covered their faces, the mouths frozen open in silenced screams of horror.

"All organisms we know of on Earth survive through consuming some sort of matter," the director was saying. "But these invaders subsist on something immaterial: fear. They frighten their victims to death, and grow stronger as they consume, apparently increasing the range at which they can manifest as terrifying imagery. Unfortunately, they never seem to starve, at least not very quickly... But here's the good news, people: we've got a new weapon, and can go on offense."

The director grinned, and nodded again to the younger woman. Now a picture of Zach appeared on the screen – slumped at a desk in the classroom, asleep, drool glistening on his cheek.

The director then gestured to her right, indicating a person fast asleep on a medical bed behind clear plastic curtains about thirty feet away – Zach himself, face and hands singed slightly red.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” she said proudly, “I present to you a man who may be among the most laid-back, unmotivated, unworried, unhurried people in the whole country, maybe even the world: Zach Lessup of Beatrice, Nebraska. His test results were highly promising, and he didn’t disappoint. Very little in the way of persistent skepticism, either. He’s just confirmed a theory our agency’s developed over the past few years about what might kill the invaders: to wit, contact with an intended victim who’s so lazy and low-key he won’t die of fright even after witnessing the purest horror these beings can conjure. With the help of a relaxant we administered, his fear responses stayed low enough to resist one of the fiercest psychic attacks our sensors have ever recorded. We believe Zach must have somehow turned this Entity’s mysterious mind-energy back against it, causing it to explode.”

An image of the blasted portion of the classroom roof now appeared, and some of the recruits whistled in awe. All the men and women in lab coats kept glancing at the remarkable fellow tucked fast asleep under white sheets.

The old woman beamed. “Yes, at long last, humanity has a champion in this war. Of course, as far as Zach knows, he’ll just continue serving as a guinea pig, trying out the effects of all sorts of hallucinogens.”

“What about the explosions?” asked a doctor at the back. “How are we going to explain those to him?”

“The force should be enough to knock him out each time,” said the director. “And his memories of the blasts... we’ll just explain those as his mind’s representation of snapping back to normalcy right before each drug finally puts him to sleep.” The director shrugged. “He’ll buy it.” A ripple of laughs ran through the crowd.

“Within a few days of waking up, it’ll be back to the front lines for Zach,” the director concluded. “Your task will be to make sure he stays fit, healthy, and relatively sane throughout his coming ordeals as we hurry him from site to site around the country. Lots more Entities to clear out! The enemy won’t know what hit ’em. Yes sir, I foresee an illustrious, well-compensated career of service – even a heroic destiny – for this young man.”

