

2017

Binge

Zack Anderson
Humboldt State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.humboldt.edu/toyon>



Part of the [Fiction Commons](#), and the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Anderson, Zack (2017) "Binge," *Toyon Literary Magazine*: Vol. 63 : Iss. 1 , Article 23.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.humboldt.edu/toyon/vol63/iss1/23>

This Fiction is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Digital Commons @ Humboldt State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Toyon Literary Magazine by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Humboldt State University. For more information, please contact kyle.morgan@humboldt.edu.

Binge

Cover Page Footnote
For Audrey

Binge by Zack Anderson

Hers was never a face you'd expect to see leering at you from the back seat of a squad car, bleary-eyed, and hollow like a jack o'lantern. She was the girl next door, the cheerleader, the kind of dame you'd be glad to bring home to mother. But mothers all over the world wept in solidarity as she was escorted from the crime scene that had once been her apartment, to the police station, where any number of unimagined horrors laid in wait.

Solemnly, she stared out at the passing city. The cars, the lights, and the people all became one blur of ominous shapes and dancing colors. But she wasn't really staring at them, nor did the fleeting images register for more than a second in her weary mind. Behind those bloodshot eyes, a separate cavalcade of sights, and sounds was rising in intensity. There was no rhyme or reason, no distinction of any sort to the scenes she saw. There was something . . . oddly delightful about the images, something all at once soothing and grating.

Shapes, sounds, colors – they all blended into a beautiful catastrophe. Once, the thoughts had existed only in the annals of her mind. She'd been alive then, tethered as we all are to the outside world. But now the cord was cut, the connection was lost, and the signal was out of range.

Sitting in the back of the police cruiser, watching her life fade away in the rear-view mirror, she didn't care to remember how exactly she'd come to this point. Even if she tried, the memories were most likely lost, adrift somewhere out of her reach. There was one thing she still could recall, however. One memory that hadn't yet withered away.

She could remember how it all began.

#

He had told her they'd see the world together. Grow old together. They'd get through it all – the pain, the love, the loss, the adventure – as long as they were together.

Apparently, somewhere along the way, he'd changed his mind. After three years of blissful partnership, he gathered his things and left their shared apartment, leaving nothing behind save for a hastily written note.

In it, he offered no explanation. He apologized, wished her well, and assured her that their paths would never cross again. At the bottom, he'd signed the letter not "Ford" as she'd always known him but, "Tom Pickett," his given name.

Hers was Angie Newton. She was twenty-six years old, and lived what most would consider a very ordinary life. She worked a boring job as a secretary, drove a boring car to and from, and had her rent check signed, and bills paid by the first of every month.

But her unremarkable world collapsed in on itself when Ford left. At first, she didn't know how to respond. They said ice cream and Bon Iver could soften the sting, but neither filled the hole that had formed within her. She felt empty, lost, alone like a sailor out at sea.

Work became difficult. She could hardly focus, much less wear a smile and whistle a happy tune. She went home determined to use her weeks of built-up sick time to recover, rebuild, and recuperate. When she returned to work, she'd be herself again, for better or worse.

With so many empty days ahead, the need quickly arose for something, anything, with which she could occupy herself. And so, at a loss for ideas, she found herself curled up on her sofa, staring across the living room at her darkened television.

They'd bought the TV together, though neither had really made much use of it. It was just what you did, buy a television. Everyone had one; to live without was to be different, to be an outsider.

When it came to TV, there weren't nearly as many options available as you're probably used to. Hell, there weren't any options at all. The entire world was entertained by a single program, which was distributed by a single network, which was owned, like most everything else, by the Daley Corporation.

This lone TV show had been dominating the airwaves for a long time. As it was on three-hundred and sixty-five days a year, there seemed no chance of it losing its place in the near future. It didn't have a name. Some people referred to it, and the television itself, collectively as "The Tube"; others called it "The Lights," or "The Sights."

But most people called it "The Omnibox."

It was difficult to explain what you saw when you looked into the Omnibox. Words couldn't really do it justice. Images – some recognizable, others abstract beyond rationalization – came and went with jarring speed. The colorful sights were accompanied by a multitude of sounds, which varied from ambient noise, to harsh static, to what almost resembled musical notes.

Were there nothing more to the Omnibox, it would've been rather unremarkable. But it wasn't just the images or the sounds that captured the interest of so many. Watching it, listening to it, even just having it on in the back of the room could make you feel . . . different. There was something about it, an almost addictive quality that made it hard to stop watching once you'd started. It changed your mind, altered your attitude, turned a bad day into a good one, and a good one into great.

Angie, unlike most of the population, had never much cared for the Omnibox. Her interests had always laid in the physical world – what she could touch, what she could feel. But, alone and despondent as she was, and without much else to keep herself busy, she opted to switch on the box and give in to the popular temptation.

She snatched the remote up off of the coffee table. Its plastic surface was marred only by a single button – a red, on-off switch. She aimed the remote at the TV and switched it on. Instantly, the empty screen gave way to a slew of ethereal images. Colors swirled to an unheard beat, dimming and brightening at odd intervals. At first, Angie was unamused by the display, but after a few minutes, she began to see the appeal.

To say the effects were instantaneous would be something of an exaggeration. But not by much. Already, her spirits were lifted slightly, as the calming effect of the OmniBox took its hold. Where there had been sorrow, there was now melancholy. Where there had been darkness, there was now a dim light, like kindling just beginning to catch flame.

Angie watched for about thirty minutes, her eyes glued to the screen. She stopped only when she became aware of how hungry she felt. It was a minor miracle; the desire for food had eluded her since Ford had left.

She switched off the TV and, filled with a new found energy, rose from the sofa and hurried to the kitchen. Moments later she returned, her arms laden with whichever snacks she'd been able to hurriedly collect from the pantry.

She returned to the TV and collapsed onto the sofa. After settling back into her nest, she reached for the remote.

#

It had been two days since she'd left the apartment. At first, she'd been able to fit walks and trips to the market into her open schedule. But now, it seemed every hour was devoted to one thing, and one thing only. The television was almost always on. Even when she left the room, Angie liked to leave it running. The sound alone was enough to keep her mind occupied. It reminded her of the euphoria the box could provide – if only she'd let it.

Sometime during the latter half of the day, her peaceful seclusion was interrupted by someone knocking on the door. Initially, Angie believed the sound to be another product of the tube. It wasn't until nearly a minute had passed – and the knocking persisted – that she realized she had a visitor.

She turned down the volume slightly, and then went to the door. A dampened voice was shouting at her from the other side, calling her name. With a grumble, Angie opened the door a crack, and to her surprise, was greeted by Marcus – one of her coworkers.

“Marcus,” said Angie, with a frown, “what are you doing here?” Marcus’ face – sagging, like that of a bloodhound – lit up when Angie appeared. “Angie!” he exclaimed, blushing slightly. “I . . . uh . . . I haven’t seen you at work in a while. Thought I’d stop by and check in – see how things are going.”

Angie sighed, opening the door a little wider. “I don’t remember giving you my address.”

“Well, actually, I got it from Ford,” said Marcus. He was clearly uncomfortable. “I heard what happened between you and him by the way. Hope you’re holding up alright.”

“I’m doing fine,” said Angie, sternly. “Terrific, actually.” Marcus nodded. Suddenly, his face contorted into a look of horror. He brought a finger to the corner of his eye. “Sorry Angie, you’ve . . . uh . . . you’ve got a little something there.” Angie wiped at her eye, then examined her fingertip. A smear of blood coated the print. Confused, she looked again at Marcus, who now bore an expression of slight disgust.

“Uh, Angie?” he asked, quietly. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

But she was distracted, beckoned back into her apartment by something inexplicable. “I told you; I’m fine,” she muttered, closing the door in Marcus’ face.

She paused, watching the tube from across the room. After a moment’s struggle, she managed to break free from its grip and flee to the bathroom. There she stood, before the sink, staring at her reflection in the mirror. She hardly recognized herself. Her face looked pale and drawn, and her eyes were bloodshot. Her hair hung in matted strands, lending her a perpetually bedraggled appearance.

Leaning in, she could see the tiniest drop of blood trickling down from the corner of her eye. She moved to wipe it away, but noticed something in the mirror before she could. Slack-jawed, she stared at the mirror, marveling as all around her the colors of the tube began to swirl and collide, filling the void around her reflection.

She saw herself enveloped in delightful, flickering flames of varying shades. Soon, it was more than scenery. When she opened her mouth, out poured a swirl of rainbow-colored mists. She was engulfed by the bright fog; seconds later, she and it were one.

Angie did not walk back to her living room. She glided, as forces unknown ferried her to the sofa. She didn’t know what they wanted, specifically – only that they wanted what was best for her. And she wanted it too. For she knew, without a doubt, what was best. The OmniBox.

#

She'd been living in isolation for nearly a week. Still, she continued to watch the tube from her nest on the sofa. The shades were drawn and the lights were off. All light, all sound, all *life* in the apartment came from the OmniBox.

It was undergoing change however, gradual though it may have been. After just a few days, the abstract assortment of shapes and sounds on the screen began to coalesce, merging and folding in on itself until, after much anticipation, the image of a man was almost apparent.

It was just a rough shape, a crude sketch but still an undeniable likeness. Devoid of face or features, this man seemed to emerge – slowly – from the tube itself, growing larger and more predominant until Angie felt he could be in the room with her.

And just as the images merged, so too did the sounds. Before long, what had once been a symphony of disparate noises began to materialize into something recognizable. It almost sounded to Angie like a man's voice.

For hours, the featureless man spoke in agonizing gibberish, trying it seemed to reach Angie without uttering a single, real word. The being's speech matured quickly, and soon she could detect discernible words in the broadcast, words that sounded as though they were meant for her alone.

First, it called out her name, over and over, never stopping, even after she'd begun screaming at the OmniBox in response. Then, for a while, it was quiet. She thought the featureless man might disappear, dissolve back into the puddle of shapes he'd been born from. But as her doubts reached their pinnacle, the man's voice boomed loudly. Gone was his nonsense vocabulary; now, he spoke in plain English.

"Do you hear me?" he asked. His voice was garbled, laced with static and wavering in pitch.

"Yes," Angie droned, nodding frantically.

"Do you see me?" the OmniBox asked, after a pause.

"Yes, yes I can see you," Angie cried. She was leaned forward, staring intently at the man in the box.

Suddenly, the screen darkened, and the man's image dimmed until he was little more than a shimmer. Angie nearly cried out in fear at his apparent departure. But then, in a low, gentle voice, he asked another question.

"Angie . . . do you *trust* me?"

She fell from the couch, onto her knees before the coffee table. "Yes, yes," she murmured, "yes, of *course* I trust you!"

She felt warm, as the tube's gentle grasp exceeded its prison-like box. It reached across the room, cradling her in a loving embrace. She could trust it; she'd never been more certain of anything in her entire life. The OmniBox knew nothing of the failings of love, or the destruction fraught by man. It knew only truth, in its purest sense.

Angie wouldn't sleep that night. There was no need for it. She'd remain seated on her couch, absorbed in the glow of the OmniBox. There she'd wait with wide eyes for further communication. The images, the colors – they'd keep her entertained, keep her occupied.

It was better than dreaming. Inside the box there were no nightmares.

#

The man continued to appear, evolving from a simple human shape into something more corporeal. Eventually, features – human features – began to stand out. A crop of brown hair, a slim physique – Angie almost thought she recognized the man in the box. Of course, that was nonsense. She would remember meeting such a man. How could she forget?

Certainly, she'd never be able to forget him now.

And, as the man continued to materialize, he continued to speak. Sometimes he spouted only crazed ramblings; more often than not he would merely growl Angie's name, as if checking to ensure she was still there, still watching him. On rare occasions, he'd ask questions, mostly concerning her loyalty to him.

Angie stayed, loyal indeed until the end of the earth. But something – little more than a whisper in the wind – began to ebb at her mind. It continued to bother her, this incomprehensible nagging – trying, it seemed, to tear her mind from the box's grasp. She fought, ignoring the world around her, until the whisper turned to a shout and she was forced to turn away.

Clear-headed for the first time in days, Angie listened, hearing much to her chagrin the ringing of her telephone. Disgruntled, she walked to the kitchen and answered it. "Hello?" she said, but for a moment there was only silence on the other end.

"Angie?" called a voice, a voice she'd never hoped – or expected – to hear again.

"Ford," Angie whispered, in disbelief.

There was another pause.

"It's me, Angie." Angie held the phone like a vice. "What do you want, Ford?" she asked, slowly.

"I – I'm sorry, Angie . . ."

"It's a little late for that," Angie snarled.

"Late for what?" asked another voice. It wasn't Ford. It sounded like Marcus.

"Marcus, is that you?"

"Yeah, I'm here. Sorry, but late for what?" "Marcus, uh . . . is Ford there with you?" Again, she was met with silence. "Hello, is anyone there?" she asked, growing impatient.

Marcus' voice emerged from the abyss. "Angie, listen to me. . ." he began, "you need to get. . ." He cut out abruptly. All Angie could hear was the tone. Confused, she set down her phone. She lingered in the kitchen, waiting for the phone to ring again. It never did. Another voice – that of the man in the box – called to her, from the other room.

"Don't listen to them," it said.

Hurriedly, Angie returned to the living room. The man in the box looked just short of complete – like a man skinned alive. He was all muscle and veins, dripping with ghastly fluids. It should have been unnerving, but for some reason, it wasn't. "What are you talking about?" Angie asked.

"Don't let them fool you," the man warned. "They don't want what's best for you." "I know that," said Angie.

"They'll keep intervening," said the muscle-man.

"I won't listen."

"You'll have to, Angie. They'll make you listen."

Suddenly, on Angie's face there formed a wicked grin. "Then I'll make them leave me alone."

#

She forgot about Marcus' intrusion. Ford, too, was no more than a distant memory. In silent wonder Angie waited and watched, as the man in the box continued to resemble something alive. From the ground up, his bloody form was encased in flesh. Gradually, the skin worked its way up his body, coating his feet, his legs, his waist.

All the while, Angie observed the process as though in a trance. This finished product of the OmniBox, constructed of strange forces and bound in human flesh, would be perfect. The perfect man, the perfect specimen. More than an image, but something real, something tangible. This man would be the perfect creation. The real and the virtual, joined in harmonious synchronicity.

And while Angie watched, he spoke to her, reminded her of his importance, forbade her from leaving him. But she didn't need to hear any of it. She couldn't dream of abandoning him. Couldn't imagine anything more important. If anything, she wanted to join him.

By the time the skin had wrapped itself around the man's shoulders, Angie began to feel a troubling familiarity toward the creation. It was more than a sensation. As she studied the canvas of the man's newly-created torso, she noticed several marks – a scar near the hip, a blemish below the shoulder. Both she recognized as belonging to Ford.

She stared in horror as the man's face affixed itself. There was no doubting it now. It was more than a resemblance. It was Ford's face she was looking

at. He was smiling at her like he used to smile at her. But his eyes . . . there was something different about his eyes.

This wasn't what Angie had expected. More than disappointed, she was perplexed. Why would the box think this was what was best for her? Ford was the last human alive that she wanted to see. All she could do was sneer in obvious disgust as the creation reached out its hand.

"Angie," he said. His voice was no longer garbled. "Come. Join me."

All around him lights flashed and stars danced about the room. But his outstretched hand held no appeal. Angie did not see the beautiful fusion she'd anticipated, the perfect specimen that the box had promised. She saw only the creator of her misery, the man who'd abandoned her without a word and led her into this depression.

"No," she said, standing in defiance. "I'm not going anywhere with you." Ford shook his head, his smile never fading. "Please," he said, "I know what's best for you."

But he didn't. And neither did the OmniBox. The simple arrogance on display made Angie tremble with anger. The man believed he had control over her, but he was wrong. And he was going to learn.

Bellowing in rage, Angie leaped over the sofa and made a break for the kitchen, where she hastily armed herself with the heaviest knife she could find. She was ready, all-too ready to make him pay. But when she returned to the living room, Ford was gone. She spun around madly, waiting for him to pop out of the shadows. But he never appeared. Angie turned then on the OmniBox. Its screen was dark, devoid even of the simple images that had entranced her so long ago.

There came a knock. With her knife hidden behind her back, Angie crept to the door. She opened it a crack, and saw no one. She opened it further, and there he was. Ford stood in the hallway, naked, still smiling. He reached out to touch her face, his smile widening.

She wouldn't let him touch her. He was so close now. Growling, Angie revealed her knife, and in one swift motion, plunged it into his chest. Still smiling, Ford looked down at the bloodless wound. He looked back at Angie, and collapsed onto the floor.

Suddenly, she was surrounded by whispers. Her neighbors stood around, peering out from their doorways. They looked in fright at the dead man. But they didn't know what Angie knew. They didn't know who he was.

Satisfied, and finally at ease, Angie looked down at her ex-lover. But it wasn't Ford she saw, lying on the ground. It was Marcus. His gaze was fixed blankly on the ceiling above. The knife protruded from his chest. The blood had spread, staining most of his shirt red.

As she fell to her knees, numb to her neighbors, to the sound of sirens closing in, Angie could hear a voice calling from inside her apartment. "I

know what's best for you," it said, in that familiar, garbled tone. "I know what's best."

#

The numbness never went away. Through trials, and interrogations, Angie remained stoic and stern, and nigh-unresponsive. Terms were thrown around, like "unknown side-effects" and "over-exposure." And someone said something about her brainwaves. Or so she thought. It became difficult to keep track, after a while.

Tears were shed before her, and sentences were made. She apologized for the crime she knew she'd committed, but she knew she didn't sound sincere. Something else was responsible for what she'd done. It wasn't her fault; she hadn't meant to kill Marcus. She felt only anger, at whatever had been pulling her strings.

The box – soon she began to crave the box. But they decided it wasn't good for her. Angie was sent somewhere, with white walls and big windows, where there were no screens, no buttons. Not even a telephone.

They thought it was gone. They thought she'd recover. But Angie realized, before long, that she didn't need the box. It had imparted upon her its essence, itself, so to speak. When she closed her eyes, or stared off into space, she could see him – that shimmering man. She could hear his voice, too, reminding her of all they hoped she'd forget.

"Don't listen to them," it would say, of her doctors, and the orderlies. "They don't know what's best, Angie."

"But you do," Angie would reply.

"I do," it would agree. "Be ready. They'll try to make you listen."

And Angie would smile.

"Don't worry. I'll make them stop."