The amount of submissions for Fango’s first-ever “Weird Words” short-fiction contest approached intimidating. Some were excellent, some interesting, others best forgotten. But only a select few, the cream of the creep, will be featured here in this space. Here is our first tale, a dark, twisted and thoroughly strange metaphysical bit of weirdness by author A.A. Garrison. Enjoy!

“To Manufacture Self-Destruction”

When John went to bed, his wife Dina was normal, but by morning her head had been replaced by an unoperational television set. He laughed at first, but stopped when he touched it and felt the unyielding weight. She awoke when he did so, and asked him, from the TV’s little cloth-grilled speaker, what was wrong, after which he only stared and shook. He humored this impossibility through breakfast, then told her goodbye and left for work. She told him she loved him using her speaker-mouth, and he quickly returned the sentiment and quit the apartment. On the way to work he saw more people, and each sported an inert television in the same fashion as Dina, the gray screens staring. He resolved to appoint himself a psychiatric doctor upon arriving at the insurance office.

Waiting in the subway, John studied the unnatural throng: the aberrant bodies allowing each other wide berths, clumsy heads bobbing, a minority wearing hats that somehow stayed on. It seemed all but he had been endowed with a TV, yet no one made note of this discrepancy.

The subway ride was awkward; work, more so. John suffered the day in a creeping unease previously unknown to him, cowering in his office. A new client came in, and she too wore the contraption. John outlined a predetermined insurance package while sweating. He cried when she left.

Before the end of the day, he called a local psychiatric practitioner out of desperation, and when the voice on the other end bore the muffled note he had come to identify with the speaker-mouths, he hung up the phone. Screams haunted his head.

Dina retained her new head when he arrived home from the office. At dinner, she repeatedly clinked her laden fork against the tube, sending the food to her lap. Later, she initiated sex. He cried again after.

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John endured this outlandish reality for three days, after which he at last underwent psychological treatment, in a mannered office downtown. The psychiatrist, also, maintained an unbranded ’80s-looking television in place of a proper head.

He showed John to a leather Barcelona chair that proved comfortable. After some questions, John related his discovery of the insupportable monstrosities, seeing himself in the psychiatrist’s tube. The shrink listened and *umm-hmm*’ed, nodding his lofty head and writing extensively. A fly landed on the dead gray screen, crawled adventurously and flew away. The shrink asked him to return next week; John made the appointment, but had no intention of keeping it.

That night, he and Dina shared another meal that went only half-eaten, then mimed sex. She demanded oral attention, and when she offered such in return, John declined. Afterward, John waited for her to sleep, of which he could only guess due to her faceless circumstance. When it seemed she was out, he studied closely the appliance that now governed her body. At the join of her neck, the grafted flesh simply spread until flush with the lacquered plywood, much like the roots of a tree. The convex tube was smooth and clean except for marks from the fork tines. Above the speaker-mouth was only a single knob, marked POWER in stenciled majuscule letters. John twisted the knob, and the tine-marked screen lit. Dina slept.

He watched in deranged wonder as the screen limned the static image of a plain white room, within it a bald man wearing newscaster habiliments. Seated at a table of indeterminate material, the man was innocent of a television and seemed to stare directly at John. When John flinched in surprise, the man in the TV followed him with his eyes, making John flinch again.

John and the newscaster stared for an inhuman minute, then the newscaster spoke, declaring with machine-gun cadence things that his eyes proclaimed true:

“To manufacture self-destruction, step one: Destroy subject’s health.”

In concert with his words, the white wall behind him assumed the image of a center-pointed circle.

He enjambed on: “Step two: Establish a channel through which immiseration may be wrought and soul stolen.”

The circle gave way to a handgun.

“Step three: Identify and foster addictions and facilitate indulgences thusly.”

The gun became a medical sketch of female genitalia, lines connecting notations to the appropriate anatomies.

“Step four: Erode energies and perpetrate confusions to disabuse all faith.”

The sketched vagina gave way to a rabbit.

“Step five: Expose weakness and shatter disciplines without prejudice.”

The rabbit became a red *9* against the white.

“Step six: Ensure subject wicked and alone, hopeless.”

The wall showed an unhappy-looking man atop a supine woman, which abruptly animated to him strangling her unmoving. It reversed and replayed, cycling several times. The newscaster stared throughout, then said “Hate” and paused again while the movie looped.

This went on for some time, and then the newscaster said, “Step seven: Suggest termination incessantly and to satisfaction.”

The strangulation became a besuited man with a television for a head.

A one-armed woman then entered the frame, tall and nurse-dressed. Braces metalled both legs and clinked when she walked. She carried a sterling salver that was presented to the seated newscaster, on it a large revolver that he took and placed over the table without looking away from John. “Nine,” the woman said, and then exited the frame, her braces speaking.

“Nine step eight: Torture torment,” the man said.

The wall showed cutlery and nails and other strange implements of pleasure.

“Step 11,” the newscaster said, and the wall displayed a picture of John staring disconsolately into his wife’s head. The man then assumed the delivered firearm and tried to eat the barrel and shot. Gore slid down the picture-wall. John screamed.

This awoke Dina and she levered upright, the screen going gray. She asked what was wrong, with her speaker-mouth, but John only kept screaming.

A.A. Garrison is a 27-year-old living in the mountains of North Carolina, writing and landscaping. His work has recently appeared in various small-press magazines and anthologies. He does not own a television.

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