

Don't Look.

The plaza stops as the tumbriel creaks its way through it.

Pause for a moment with the small crowd, frozen for a moment on a pretty June day in a bustling little city that's somewhere in what still looks like America if you don't peer at it too closely. The people in the crowd mostly still look like us. They mostly still have their lives and their jobs and their families and their hobbies and all the other things that keep them focused on anything but what looms over them to the north. They don't talk about the things that come from the north.

The tumbriels come from the north.

If people looked at the tumbriels, *which they do not do*, they would see small enclosed wagons that are made out of wood that is **almost** familiar and metal that comes **close** to appearing healthy. There are no horses and no engines: the tumbriels simply creak creak creak their way through the roads and to the police stations. The tumbriels then stop there, back doors agape, until neutral-faced policemen put people in the tumbriels. When the tumbriels

are filled, the doors close, and the vehicles creak creak creak their way back to the north.

The tumbrels don't go to the police stations every day. Or every week. There's no pattern or system to the tumbrels. There isn't even a designated pickup location for the tumbrels. The cycle of pickups doesn't seem to be increasing, or decreasing, or anything. But the tumbrels will come, weaving their way through the crowds, and if you raise a hand against one, you die. If you try to rescue anyone, you die. If you even shake your fist in anger, you die. The only act of rebellion you might be allowed is to stand in front of one - they won't run you over if you're alive - but stay too long and you will suddenly not be alive any longer. The tumbrels are simply implacable. So everyone just first stops, and then sidles out of the way.

And nobody sees anything at all.

But even if nobody will see, still people will fidget. See that young man? He sits at a cafe table. As the tumbrel passes him on the street he closes his eyes and clutches the metal-backed drinks menu on his table as if it was a talisman. Or that woman there: the one looking outward from a planter-heavy walkway overhanging the plaza? She stares straight ahead, a watering can for the flowerpots left

among them where it dropped. And then there's the old man, sitting on a bus bench. He sees the tumbriel, and his face grows grey with fear and pain. If anyone dared notice the old man, they'd conclude that the tumbriels were about to claim another victim.

But eventually the tumbriel leaves the plaza, on its way to the police station. The crowd sighs, then the people in the plaza start moving away in earnest, because the tumbriel will be back. The young man spasmodically rushes from his seat, tossing money down for his uneaten lunch. The woman backs away, leaving behind everything to simply **go**. The old man? He stays. He clearly has nowhere else to **go**.

Time passes.

The creak creak creak returns. It's a deeper creak, because of course the tumbriel is now full of men and women who dully look through the gaps in the walls at the world that they will soon leave. Nobody looks at them. The captives do not exist. And if the captives do not exist, then they are nothing, and if the captives are nothing, then nothing is wrong and people on the outside must just keep on sidling away. So the tumbriels go creak creak creak...

Clunk. One of the wheels of the tumbriel has rolled over a metal drinks menu. It doesn't stop the vehicle, of course; it doesn't even really slow it down. But what it does do is lift one of the wheels up and off of the road for a moment, only to rattle down again. A little bit of noise, and a little bit of vibration...

...which disturbs a precariously-perched watering can. It falls from its spot among the flowerpots, only to crash onto the tumbriel below. Not that it matters; the tumbriels are tough not-wood and sort-of-metal. Nothing breaks, of course. The impact barely disengages the clasp holding the two back doors together, in fact. Nothing significant.

As the tumbriel approaches the old man, he gets up from the bus bench. His face is grey, and sweating. He clutches one arm with the other. As the old man staggers in front of the tumbriel he collapses, grabbing at his chest. It is clear that the old man has managed to panic himself into a heart attack. Nobody helps him as he lies there dying.

But the tumbriel stops, fairly suddenly, because while the old man is alive he is not an obstacle to be run over. And then, after an awful, stretched minute... from the now-open doors come the dull-eyed people. They drop

from the back, and when they hit the ground, they hit it running. Nobody raises a hand against them. Nobody shouts out about the rescue. Nobody even shakes a fist in anger as the dull-eyed people lose themselves in the crowd.

Fairly soon, the old man dies. Once he dies, he becomes an obstacle, so the tumbriel runs over him without a pause. The now-lighter creak creak creak follows the tumbriel out of the plaza.

And nobody sees anything at all.

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