

AIRTIME

written by

Ben Luckinbill

ben.luckinbill@gmail.com

INT. ONE ROOM APT - NIGHT

A man alone in bed. He awakens with a start, gasping for air.

He falls out of bed wheezing. He is a tired looking man in late middle-age. This is WHITMAN.

An angry alarm sound chirps every few seconds throughout the apartment.

Still gasping, Whitman grabs for the night stand. Luminescent paint on the ceiling lights a small circle following his movement. The tiny apartment is filled with a light smoky haze.

There are blue pills scattered on the night stand and an empty pill bottle.

Whitman is gasping and beginning to panic. He throws open the night stand drawer, sending blue pills flying.

More blue pills are scattered about inside the drawer along with some junk and one well worn General Systems Filt-Al-Rite™ rebreather mask.

Whitman pulls the mask on and it plays a short synthesized jingle.

There is a readout on the removable filter module. A text animation scrolls across the readout.

ON FILTER READOUT

GENERAL SYSTEMS: Making life... BETTER

A cartoon plays of a cute little algae character, AL. Al sucks in tiny floating skulls and crossbones inflating to twice his size. He then squeezes out a fart labeled "O2". It's an oxygen molecule.

Al promptly dies. The O2 molecule floats away for a smiling man to inhale as Al's little angel winged spirit floats away to heaven.

The animation ends and the readout displays a timer:

AIRTIME <D:00|H:05|M:27|S:14>

Time ticks away.

BACK TO

Whitman. He sucks in a couple labored breaths.

His panic begins to subside. He stands. The illuminating paint lights his path as he walks across the room. The ambient light rises to a dim glow throughout the apartment.

What once may have been a clean white pod-like room has seen better days.

A colorful graphic animates across the wall. The walls are low res displays.

ON WALL

GOOD MORNING!

BACK TO

Whitman hangs his head. What's good about it?

The apartment speaks. It has a pleasant neutral voice.

APARTMENT

Good morning Mr. Whitman! You're up early. Would you like your weather report?

WHITMAN

Later.

He crosses the room. Built into the wall below the room's single particulate crusted porthole window is a General Systems Filt-Al-Rite wall unit.

The readout on the wall unit flashes in time with the electronic warning sound that continues to ring.

WALL UNIT READOUT

AIRTIME <D:00|H:00|M:00|S:00>

BACK TO

Whitman. He mashes buttons to try and get the wall unit working. He swipes his wrist over the readout several times.

The machine burps angrily displaying the message:

<CREDS MAXD>

WHITMAN

No no no no...

APARTMENT

Would you like your weather report?

(a pause)

Funny cat viddies?

WHITMAN

NO!

APARTMENT

Standing by.

The apartment displays its standby animation. An infinite scroll of advertisements parade across the wall.

WHITMAN

Actually--

The wall display brightens up again.

WHITMAN

Why didn't you wake me up when the wall unit stopped filtering? I could have died.

APARTMENT

The Filt-Al-Rite wall unit has its own proprietary warning tone.

WHITMAN

Yes. Obviously I slept through it. Why didn't you wake me up?

APARTMENT

(after pause)

Due to ongoing patent disputes
between Goggle Inc. And General
Systems, interoperability has been
suspended between all products--

WHITMAN

Right. Of course.

KITCHENETTE

Whitman grabs a knife.

BACK AT THE WALL UNIT

He attempts to pry the wall unit open with the knife. He
receives a painful shock accompanied by a loud warning sound.

The wall unit readout flashes a message:

<NO HAX PLZ>

Whitman roars and bangs on the machine a couple times without
effect. He hurts his hand.

He glances down at the readout on his mask.

MASK READOUT

<D:00|H:05|M:20|S:42>

ON WHITMAN

He's burning through airtime. He attempts to calm himself and
slow his breathing. He collects himself.

WHITMAN

Weather?

The wall graphic blooms to life again.

APARTMENT

I'll be happy to retrieve that
information Mr. Whitman but I see
your credits are maxed out.

(MORE)

APARTMENT (CONT'D)

I can however provide a free weather report with your participation. Would you like to answer a short survey or play a fun game to receive your free weather report?

Whitman shrugs.

WHITMAN

A fun game.

Whitman watches as a 2.5D interactive ad is projected in front of him.

A dark skinned couple with bright smiles embrace each other tightly, naked, hips pressed together to hide their modesty.

The couple presents a cartoon elephant and walrus, each with dingy yellow tusks.

Below the elephant is a pod of toothWhite™. Below the walrus brandX.

Whitman rolls his eyes and picks the toothWhite with a jab of his finger. A virtual toothbrush appears. The walrus gets one too. A timer counts down: **3, 2, 1, GO!**

Whitman handily defeats the walrus in the tusk brushing race thanks to the superior cleaning power of toothWhite.

TOOTHWHITE COUPLE

Congratulations! Aren't you bright?
You used toothWhite!

WHITMAN

I sure am.

The ad disappears.

APARTMENT

Great job! Now your free weather report for San Fernando, California - May 18th, 2069 - brought to you by Goggle, the lesser of all possible evils and, of course, toothWhite! Aren't you bright? You used toothWhite.

Cheery music plays. The wall graphics display animated weather information.

Temp: 104F AQI: 500+ HAZARDOUS

WHITMAN
Another day in paradise.

On the wall options appear to purchase the Phil Collins song "Another Day In Paradise" - or any of a dozen others with the same title.

A huge pop up window:

LISTEN FREE BY TAKING FOUR SHORT QUIZES!

ON WHITMAN

WHITMAN
No. NO. Close that. Exit.

The pop-up closes after a few tries.

APARTMENT
Don't forget your General Systems portable Filt-Al-Rite Mask!

WHITMAN
I'm already wearing it, idiot.

APARTMENT
I'm sorry. It sounds like you're upset with me. How can I improve your experience?

WHITMAN
Just-- EXIT, OFF, shutdown, whatever.

APARTMENT
You'd like me to shutdown. Are you sure?

WHITMAN
No. It's fine. Just... be quiet.

The wall graphics retreat and fade away.

KITCHENETTE

Whitman stands in front of a pill dispenser with red, yellow, and blue chambers.

A pill graphic glows above a big friendly button marked "Rx". Below that is a uScrip™ logo.

Each colored chamber has a corresponding cartoon pill character that clearly denotes their effects:

Red makes you peppy, Yellow keeps you mellow, Blue puts you to sleep. Tubes run from the dispenser's chambers into the wall. Whitman hits the "Rx" button and the machine blerps at him angrily.

There's a scrolling readout on the pill dispenser too.

PILL DISPENSER READOUT

Patient: Jim Whitman | Credit limit reached | Daily scrip: 2x Red, 1x Yellow, 1x blue | Cannot dispense | Withdrawal side effects may include: Anger, Anxiety, Blurred Vision...

An endless list of side effects continues to scroll by.

BACK TO

Whitman. He hangs his head.

WHITMAN'S BEDSIDE

He looks at his bedside table. Blue pills everywhere.

He collects a handful of them.

He sits on the edge of the bed staring at them. He could swallow them all. He makes a choice - to put them away in a plastic container and place it back in the drawer.

KITCHENETTE

He opens the fridge. It is empty save a molded bit of who-knows-what in a bento box.

Whitman grabs a container of Nutrilax™ from the cabinet.

He stirs some of the powder in a glass of water. He takes a breath, pulls aside his mask, and drinks it down in one go.

INT. BATHROOM - CONTINUOUS

Whitman stands nude with just his mask on. He steps into a dingy plastic booth. He is blasted with a fine white powder that dissolves almost immediately after it hits his skin.

Whitman stands in front of the mirror. He holds his breath as he lifts his mask to scrape the last of a depilator™ over his face to remove a thin layer of stubble. There's not enough to remove it all.

He takes another breath from the mask and holds it in. He examines himself in the mirror. Chest puffed out he stands as straight as he can. It doesn't improve things much given the effort. Disappointed, he slumps back down into his natural slouch as he exhales and puts his mask back on.

Whitman slides a wall panel open to reveal a small closet. He retrieves the lone business suit that's inside.

It's decent quality but a bit out of fashion, and a size too large for him. He looks vaguely like a child playing dress-up in his Daddy's suit.

Dressed to not impress, he pops open a drawer in the wall and retrieves the only item inside: an antique gold pocket watch.

He opens the watch and looks at it. An engraving reads:

"To Jim from Father, 2015"

He places the watch in his inside jacket pocket and looks into the mirror.

WHITMAN

You're lucky you didn't live to see... Any of this.

He pats the watch. He leans toward the mirror glaring into his own eyes.

WHITMAN

You will not have to sell it today.
You will return to gainful and
productive employment today. You
will display a Positive Personal
Attitude and an air of
professionalism. You will NOT have
to sell your Father's watch today.

INT. APT - CONTINUOUS

Whitman shuts the lid of a briefcase, jams a fedora on his head, and exits.

APARTMENT

Have a safe and productive day Mr.
Whitman as you breathe easy with
your General Systems Filt--

The door slams behind Whitman. The audio cuts and the lights fade out automatically.

EXT. GENERAL SYSTEMS PLAZA - DAY

Whitman holds his breath as he exits to the street through the plastic sheeting at the top of the Metro stairway. He pulls on his mask at the last possible moment. He checks his airtime.

ON READOUT

<D:00|H:04|M:34|S:02>

WHITMAN

looks around the plaza to orient himself.

The city is obscured in layers of churning smog and heavy particulates. A shining dual towered building in the shape of a double helix is being erected above the plaza.

From nearby office buildings jumpjets leap into flight here and there then disappear into the haze.

Beyond the plaza, ground traffic is at a standstill. There are people trying to sell snacks to the drivers, small roasted animals. Children knock on vehicle windows begging.

Beyond the traffic through the roiling smog are the faint outlines of a scrap village built atop old half ruined buildings.

Whitman proceeds ahead.

In the center of the plaza several lines of people stretch in different directions. The lines are so long that they disappear into the haze.

Whitman walks to the end of one line and addresses the masked and goggled person there.

WHITMAN

Air relief or employment relief?

MASK AND GOGGLES

Nutrition relief.

Whitman nods and continues on.

Oriented, he takes his place at the end of another line behind a young woman wearing a shiny next-gen dual Filt-Al-Rite mask.

WHITMAN

Employment relief?

YOUNG WOMAN

You betcha!

She stares at him. Whitman does not want to chat. Even if he could afford the extra air he would not want to. The young woman seems to be smiling under her shiny double filtered mask.

Whitman looks down, then away, then up to avoid engagement.

She follows his gaze and looks up toward the future General Systems tower.

YOUNG WOMAN

Isn't it something? The tower will filter all the air for the sprawl. Can you believe it?

Whitman shrugs. The girl is probably quite pretty under her mask.

WHITMAN

Um...

He is saved as the woman suddenly cocks her head and stares blankly into space. A graphic is projected in front of her eyes. It reads:

Sorry, I'm receiving an important message!

She turns away. Whitman is relieved.

PLAZA MONTAGE

Whitman waits. And waits. Moving forward by tiny increments through the haze. He checks his airtime readout now and again.

Time ticks away - speeding up in time lapse.

INT. EMPLOYMENT CENTER - DAY

As Whitman enters he pulls off his mask with relief.

Whitman walks through a security check. A masked and helmeted corpCop shrugs curiously at the empty briefcase but lets Whitman move along.

The employment center is an older building retrofitted with newer tech. A maze of lines lead to a number of secure bank teller-like windows.

Instead of humans behind them there are 2.5D viddy displays: Video projectections of workers based in some other location.

Whitman's mask dangles from his neck. The readout thankfully paused for a time. He breathes deeply the sweet sweet air of the employment center. He almost looks happy. He stares off into space.

WHITMAN'S DAYDREAM MONTAGE

Whitman wears a huge grin throughout.

WHITMAN'S APARTMENT

Waking at 4:00am.

ON THE METRO

Crushed between strange and fragrant commuters.

REFLECTION IN WHITMAN'S EYES

Spreadsheets, glorious spreadsheets, filled in at mach speed.

OFFICE FLOOR

Whitman being dressed down by a higher-up for all to witness.

BREAK ROOM

Office party! No one else is smiling but Whitman. The cake reads: "Happy Birthday Valued Employee".

CUBICLE

Whitman spins and spins in an office chair joyfully.

CUT TO:

EMPLOYMENT CENTER - LATER

The person behind Whitman nudges him forward, roughly. Back to reality.

The young woman in front of Whitman is next. Whitman begins to psyche himself up for his interview.

The young woman steps up to the window.

Whitman steps forward to wait at the head of the queue. He shifts his weight nervously from one foot to the other as the interviewer questions the young woman.

The interviewer's final question grabs Whitman's attention.

INTERVIEWER

(flatly)

What would you say is your greatest strength, and your greatest weakness?

YOUNG WOMAN

Well. I'm a perfectionist, very detail oriented. So that's a strength. But sometimes I just won't quit till I find the very best way to solve a problem. Then I remind myself that innovation isn't always efficient, and sometimes "good enough" really is good enough! Does that make sense?

A moment passes. The interviewer flickers away, then returns.

INTERVIEWER

Congratulations. Please proceed to the second floor for HR processing.

The young woman turns around to share her triumph.

Whitman brushes past her to address the interviewer, practically shoving the young woman out of the way. The young woman's enthusiasm is unaffected. She exits.

WHITMAN

WHY?

INTERVIEWER

I'm sorry sir? Please swipe your comm to begin the interview process.

WHITMAN

That's my answer!

The interviewer frowns.

WHITMAN

Ms. Florez, right? I know you. You must at least recognize my face.

(MORE)

WHITMAN (CONT'D)

Seven years I've been coming and giving that answer - the only correct answer - to that question. And nothing!

INTERVIEWER

(she does remember him, but)

Please, Mr. Whitman, just swipe so I can log your visit and process your interview.

WHITMAN

Every day, six days a week, for seven years!

Whitman swipes his wrist comm.

WHITMAN

You want me to swipe? I'll swipe. Log and process this...

He must swipe a couple times till finally the machine chirps and his personal info appears on screen.

WHITMAN

You want to know my greatest strength and weakness?!

INTERVIEWER

(sighs)

Sure.

WHITMAN

BITCH I'VE GOT NOTHING LEFT TO LOSE!

The interviewer turns and her image flickers away. Whitman explodes in fury. He bangs his briefcase against the blast-proof window till the lid swings from the hinges.

Two corpCops appear behind him.

EXT. GENERAL SYSTEMS PLAZA - CONTINUOUS

Whitman is prodded out the door by the two corpCops with crackling shockBats™. Like cattle prods but meaner and more sleek, they cause little burns on the fabric.

WHITMAN
(wheezing as the dirty air
hits his throat)
I'm leaving peacefully! Stop! My
suit--

He pats at the burnt spots. He falls, tearing a pant leg.

The corpCops, after giving him a couple more zaps, leave him lying there in a heap.

Whitman rolls onto his back struggling to breathe. He pulls on his mask. It chimes.

The airtime readout begins to tick away again.

Pedestrians pass Whitman appearing and disappearing through the smog. One steps over him. Another trips over him, then gives him a kick for good measure.

Whitman starts to sob, tries to control himself. He gives up and begins to weep, hard and loud. But only for a few moments.

He forces himself to stand. He steadies his breathing.

Suddenly, in a panic, Whitman checks for the pocket-watch. He pulls it out. Opens it. It is undamaged. He is relieved.

WHITMAN
Not quite nothing to lose. Not yet.
I've still got you.

EXT. GENERAL SYSTEMS PLAZA - LATER

Whitman stands in another long line of people that disappear into the smog.

Time ticks away on his filter readout.

A riot chick gets in line behind Whitman. She wears improvised body armor and a run of the mill hardware store mask. Every breath she takes makes a disturbing wheeze. She starts to try to ask Whitman a question.

WHITMAN
Filter relief, yes.

She nods, grateful.

Whitman shuffles through the smog. Time ticks away on his mask.

Further ahead on the line a couple are passing a single filter mask between them.

Ahead is a door labeled General System Filter Relief. Several corpCops emerge with a slick suited executive.

EXEC

That's it for today, people. I'm sorry. Get yourself to a shelter, a Starbucks, or a day pass for the metro and come back tomorrow. We're all out of free stuff. Good luck.

The exec hurries back inside to murmurs of disappointment and cries of anger.

The corpCops block the door. The crowd starts to break up.

RIOT CHICK

If I could afford a goddam Starbucks I wouldn't be here.

WHITMAN

What are you gonna do?

RIOT CHICK

Get arrested. You're welcome to join me.

Whitman hesitates.

RIOT CHICK

Suit yourself, suit.

Being called a "suit" give Whitman a tiny boost. The riot chick walks away and disappears into the smog. He considers following her.

The mask sharing couple pass Whitman. Whitman turns toward a sound.

An older woman collapses to the ground, choking. Whitman jogs over to her. She has nothing but a wet rag over her face. Whitman calls to the couple as they disappear into the smog.

WHITMAN
H-- HEY! Somebody help!

People brush past him. He turns toward the corpCops.

WHITMAN
HEY, A LITTLE HELP HERE!

They ignore him.

Whitman drops his briefcase and takes the older woman by the arms. He starts to drag her toward the corpCops. He's no spring-chicken himself though.

WHITMAN
Shit. Lady?

He stops and looks back to see the corpCops heading inside.

WHITMAN
Shit. Shit.

He crouches down next to her. He takes a deep breath and holds it. He places his mask on the older woman's face.

Time ticks away on the readout. She starts to come to then tries to push the mask away.

WHITMAN
Lady, I'm trying to help you.

OLDER WOMAN
(Weakly)
No, no, no.

Whitman leans in to hear her.

OLDER WOMAN
Estoy listo. Estoy listo. Salvese.
Salvese.

She tries again to push the mask away. Whitman can't hold his breath any longer. He takes the mask to get a deep breath for himself. Time is flying off the timer.

He tries to put it back on the woman. She resists, coughing and struggling for air.

WHITMAN
Goddammit stop that.

She is too weak to fight him. He holds the mask on her. She draws in a few more short breaths clean of air, stops coughing.

He holds his breath. A couple moments pass. They exchange an emotional gaze, and she dies.

All the feelings of the day swell up within Whitman. He yanks his mask back on and abandons his busted briefcase.

Whitman bangs on the filter relief door. He waits a moment then bangs more.

INTERCOM VOICE
Filter relief is closed for the day, sir.

WHITMAN
There's a dead woman on the street out here. She's dead and you people did nothing to help her.

A pause.

INTERCOM VOICE
Thank you for informing us, sir. Sanitation has already arrived.

Whitman looks back. The woman's body is being swept up by an autonomous trash vehicle.

WHITMAN
She wasn't trash! She's dead and she was-- a lady. Some lady who spoke Spanish. And...

Whitman slumps down and sits against the door. A long moment passes.

INTERCOM VOICE

I'm sorry... We really try to do our best with the resources we're given.

WHITMAN

That's it isn't it? That's all any of us can do. My filter's running out. I'm gonna die. I'm gonna die... Unemployed.

INTERCOM VOICE

I'm sorry. I just can't let you in. I'll lose my job.

WHITMAN

I didn't ask you to! I mean, no. No. It's okay. Hold on to your job as long as you can, kid. One day you'll be redundant. Like me. Or dead in the trash, like that Spanish lady.

Whitman takes out his Father's pocket watch and looks at it.

WHITMAN

Anyway, I'm not dying today damn it. I've still got one more thing left to lose.

A pause.

CLOSE ON INTERCOM

INTERCOM

Um... Okay. That's good.

But Whitman is already gone.

EXT. BLACK MARKET - NIGHT

A ramshackle marketplace built on top of earthquake damaged buildings out of scaffolding and scrap. Stalls with vendors hawking their wares.

Whitman emerges from the smog.

ON MASK FILTER READOUT

Time ticking away.

BACK ON

Whitman, as he continues down a narrow side street.

EXT. SIDE STREET - CONTINUOUS

A big brick wall of a black guy guards an old book shop with a couple body-modded tough guys: a frog-man and a shark-man.

The big guy is somehow way more intimidating than the guy with the shark head and teeth or the giant frog-faced fellow with the Syrian B-9 auto shot dangling out of his sport coat.

Whitman gathers his courage and approaches them.

Whitman shows his Father's pocketwatch to the big guy. The big guy examines the inscription and frowns.

BIG GUY

We don't sell filters, Jim. Try the stalls down that way.

MASK FILTER READOUT

Time is running out.

BACK TO

Whitman at a tinker's stall. The tinker waves his hands and shakes his head NO. Whitman moves on.

He is being tailed by two junkies.

Whitman hurries on through the smog.

He stops short, the junkies are in front of him now, blocking his way.

JUNKIE 1

You need a filter, Pop? We got it.
What you got to trade?

Whitman shows them the watch.

JUNKIE 1

Let me get a look at it. Let me
hold it.

Whitman pulls the watch back.

One junkie grabs him, the other grabs the watch. Whitman is
thrown to the ground.

The junkies disappear into the smog.

Whitman's mask starts emitting an alarm. Whitman lays back
and begins to laugh and then cough.

Whitman sobs once. Calms himself. It takes a moment but -
he's ready. Today's the day.

MASK FILTER READOUT

The airtime ticks down to all zeroes and begins to flash.

WHITMAN'S POV

The world slowly goes BLACK.

There are sounds of a very brief struggle nearby.

A blur. A light in the darkness. Whitman's mask is jostled.

BACK ON WHITMAN

The mask chimes happily. Whitman sits up with a start.

ON MASK READOUT

A new filter with days and days left to go!

ON BIG GUY

He crouches over Whitman. Assured he's okay, the big guy
tosses a couple extra filters onto Whitman's lap.

BIG GUY
You alright? You look alright.
Can't promise they're sanitary, or
they all work, but those guys don't
need 'em anymore.

Whitman is stunned. Finally he speaks.

WHITMAN
Thank you.

The big guy holds out Whitman's pocket watch.

BIG GUY
Here.

WHITMAN
No, please, you keep it.

The big guy shakes his head.

WHITMAN
It's the least I can do. It's real
gold y'know. Swiss movement.

BIG GUY
(with force)
Take it.

Whitman quickly takes it.

WHITMAN
(quietly)
Thanks you.

BIG GUY
(with a smile)
It's alright. What would I do with
a watch with someone else's name in
it anyway?

The big guy stands. Whitman pockets the filters. The big guy helps him up.

BIG GUY
We live to fight another day, Jim.
Take care of yourself.

The big guy turns and walks away.

WHITMAN
I'll do my best.

BIG GUY
(glances back)
That's all any of us can do.

The big guy disappears into the smog.

Whitman looks at his watch. The second hand sweeps around.

The airtime readout on his mask counts down casting a little light through the haze. The smog roils and thickens obscuring everything...

END