

The Bad Place

By Austen Tucker · 2026

How do we eat when the economy goes rabid? What replaces it? How do we continue to work and live?

These are the questions people keep asking me. They're the questions I ask myself when I can't sleep. Rabies Capitalism and After Scarcity gestured at them and refused to answer them cleanly, because there are two answers.

One is architectural: what replaces the economy, the institutions, the logistics, the money.

This essay is not that answer.

This is the Tuesday answer. Who grows the food? Who cleans up the garbage? Who feeds your neighbor? Who keeps your friend from disappearing into the algorithmic grief machine?

I may be a science fiction writer, but I refuse to handwave this away with "robots." The actual answer is worse because it is ordinary.

We do.

But first.

Let's be honest: this isn't the good place. There is no divine intervention coming, no Act-3 rescue party here to save the day.

We're in the Bad Place. Where some people keep pied-à-terres in Manhattan while others get arrested for sleeping rough. Where anger gets packaged, optimized, and sold back to us at scale. Where division gets turned into engagement that curdles the blood and leaves our reward centers screaming for the next hit.

Where bookies in our phones take action on anything that twitches, suffers, or dies.

Where power launders itself in public and calls us rude for noticing.

This will not be a kind transition. The people who profited from the old machine set the terms, cashed the checks, and left the rest of us with the fire.

Here's how to live and love while their hubris burns everything down.

Don't get it twisted, this will absolutely be a long fire. Look at the skyline: champagne on the balconies, tents under the overpasses, and a city that somehow still claims there isn't enough money to fix the bridge. Churches chasing the apocalypse while we argue about who is worthy of eating. "Are there no poorhouses? No work-camps? Just grab 'em by the bootstrap!"

A handful of companies own the grocery aisle. Seed patents turn planting into a permissions regime. Mickey Mouse charges us to remember our childhood. The rent goes up. Then it goes up again.

I said in Rabies Capitalism that the system was thrashing. I was generous. The thrashing started before the models did. AI didn't cause this and AI won't fix this. The models are accelerant. The fire is old.

This is not a transition. Transitions end. This is a mutation — the shape capitalism takes while it stays alive inside its own decline.

It'll be a long fire.

There are two grifts in our culture fighting for your heart right now.

Despair says: it's over. Why try. Why bother. Why fall in love. Why finish the book. Buy my podcast.

Hopium says: the AGI will fix it. The election will fix it. The new platform will fix it. Wait. Buy my podcast.

Both are subscriptions. Both are billing you.

And here is the part I need to be clear about — hopelessness is the harvest. The system does not need you to agree with it. It needs you to give up. A hopeless person doesn't try. Doesn't make things. Doesn't call their friend. Doesn't write the novel. Doesn't fall in love.

Hopelessness is the most extractive labor arrangement ever invented. It gets you to do the work of breaking yourself, for free, in advance.

"OK but I don't have money for rent." Yes. And it will get worse.

"Where can I find the time and energy to do things after working 80 hours a week?" You're right! And there's lots of bad endings coming. Again, we are in the Bad Place.

And the days keep coming anyway.

So how do you live in the fire?

Make dinner. Make things. Show up for people. Refuse the dissociation the rabies wants from you.

The rabid system wants you numb. Being present is the rebellion.

That's the whole tactical answer. Not a master plan. Not a five-point framework. Be a person. Stay one on purpose.

Above all else, the Bad Place wants you alone.

Alone, we are exploitable. We can be run into the ground. Replaced with robots.

But I do not believe mass suffering is as stable as the powerful think it is. We have many historical examples of humans, at scale, dragging nobles out into the street for justice.

We also have Viktor Frankl — not as a slogan, but as a witness. He survived multiple concentration camps. Man's Search for Meaning is not optimistic. It's full of people choosing tiny acts of humanity inside a place built to erase it. Men sharing their last bread. Walking the barracks to comfort the dying. Finding, somehow, a human moment inside engineered starvation.

Hope was already gone. The kindness wasn't.

And I think, above all else, these rabid institutions want our respect as they rob us blind. Refuse them that. Save your decorum and your respect for your friends, your neighbors. Turn off the TV. Pick up a deck of cards and learn a new game.

There is no romance in this. It's the backbreaking, unglamorous work of refusing to disappear from the world just because it's on fire.

The building is past salvaging and will burn down to ash. And the ash, as it always has, will fertilize the next phase of life on earth. Something new. Something unrecognizable.

While the latest nuclear war scare was happening — it doesn't matter the week, there's plenty to go around nowadays — I built a word processor.

Nobody asked me to. It's not going to fix the economy. It's not even the most useful thing I could be making.

The word processor is called Novel T. I wrote about it in Claude Design and the Novel T. I drummed it up in an hour or two just to see if I wanted to take it further. It runs at novelt.vercel.app.

I put it away for now. Maybe I'll finish it. Maybe it'll be my benchmark for future models. But one thing I didn't do?

I didn't pay for it.

I didn't ask for permission.

And if it failed? I'd have lost two hours. That was the whole risk.

The market is infected. It will run its fever slowly, with great theater, charging admission the whole way down.

Novel T isn't the point. The point is that it got made. Nobody assigned it. Nobody funded it. Nobody gave me permission. I had an idea, two hours, and enough spite to make a little door where there hadn't been one.

That's not a revolution. Not by itself.

But it is practice.

It's a meal from a recipe you didn't buy. A game night around something your friend made just for the table. A draft that exists because you kept going. A dumb little video made to make your wife laugh. A neighbor fed because someone finally had the tools to build the thing they kept dreaming about.

None of it saves the world.

All of it keeps us from disappearing.

It's a room where nobody has to earn the right to stay.

The long fire is here. So make something small enough to hold. Bring someone with you. Tell them you love them before the world teaches you to be embarrassed by it.

Not later.

Tuesday.