

# on spec

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**Leah Bobet**  
**Kevin Cockle**  
**Jude Dillon**  
**S. Evans**  
**Matthew Johnson**  
**Helena Krobath**  
**Daniel LeMoal**  
**Bill Stuart**  
**Dave Whittier**  
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"Princess" © Elaine Chen

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# Notes Toward a *Smart* Space Program

Steve Mohn, Fiction Editor

1) Stop throwing away equipment worth hundreds of millions of dollars. Anything that goes into space should remain in space. It is idiotic to treat vessels and vehicles beyond their mission usefulness as garbage to be incinerated upon re-entry. Look ahead to the time when someone can make clever use of these junkyard resources. Boost them into orbits that won't decay or won't soon decay. Every piece of the International Space Station is doomed to atmospheric flames; every piece of it should be stored in orbit and eventually recycled.

2) Start cleaning up after ourselves. Earth is surrounded by untold pieces of old spacecraft: nuts and bolts, bits of foil and foam, chunks of larger stuff. We need robot "vacuum" cleaners to start picking up this flotsam, much of which is tracked due to the hazards it poses to satellites and astronauts. It will only get worse, but even if you never finish cleaning up, the chances for future missions will be improved.

3) Put hardware and supply into space with rockets; put people up in planes that launch from the backs of high-altitude carriers. A strong light vehicle that carries only fuel and passengers can make it to Low Earth Orbit, where the people will transfer to—

4) —space shuttles. Don't ground the shuttles. Park them in LEO and have them ferry people and materials to orbital destinations. The shuttles need not ever return to Earth, but may be cannibalized for parts as they wear out. These are big machines full of lots of useful stuff. It is

as stupid to let them rot on the ground as it would be to let them burn up on re-entry.

5) Use only passive landing vessels for returning people to Earth. Apollo space capsules each held three astronauts. They have a perfect record of returning people to the planet. They float. They could be sent up empty in bunches, and attached to space stations already in service. An emergency requiring everyone to abandon ship would automatically lean toward a happy outcome, rather than its tragic opposite.

6) Screw Mars—colonize the moon. Any trip to Mars within the near future will be a total waste of time and money. The moon and Mars are different places, but if you don't already know how to live on the moon, you won't know how to live on Mars. If anything goes wrong, you won't get back. The moon is only three days away, and we know that people in trouble can get back from there alive. The choice is between a kid's fantasy ride and a real job of work waiting to get done—which is why no one will go near it. Except the Chinese.

7) Whenever possible, launch containers of water and park them in stable orbits. Offworld economics will count on one mineral over any other: hydrogen oxide. Everyone knows there's plenty of H<sub>2</sub>O out in the solar system, but we can't get to it until we have established ourselves offworld. That means water—water to drink, water as a solar-wind shield, water for aquiculture, water to electrolyze into hydrogen and oxygen (as part of the air mix) and to catalyze back into water in fuel cells. Water will be the gold standard of an offworld economy. The more you put up now, the less you'll have to put up later and the more it will be worth when you get there.

Bon voyage! •



By January 2, all of them would be sent packing—but until then, Prescott was at their mercy.

## **An Obtuse Argument Against Foreign Products**

Daniel LeMoal

“Dead Weight!!!”

Ted Wight stiffened at the sound of his manager’s disembodied voice. Prescott was close by—perhaps only a few aisles away.

“Dead Weight... why in the hell is this Aoi Haru merchandise still on pallets? Have you even moved a box since I last spoke to you?”

Prescott finally emerged out of the household appliances section, a badger in badly wrinkled khakis. Wight turned to run and hide, but walked straight into a formidable tower of cardboard boxes, all stamped with Aoi Haru’s simple-yet-distinct brand logo: a tiny blue leaf, deliberately low-rez. Despite the fact that the manufacturer’s DVD players, home theatre receivers, stereo components and other various pieces of electronica were a fraction of the size their competitors (even their big-screen TVs were waifishly thin), they each had the heavy-metal density of a small planet. Wight’s hammy flanks bounced ineffectually off the wall of boxes and practically into the arms of his manager.

“If you’re going to stumble around with your mouth open, at least offer me an excuse,” Prescott continued, clutching his travel mug and sandwich like they were weapons. The man never sat down for his

lunch break, preferring to prowling the aisles while he ate. He only seemed to launch into one of his vocal tirades when his mouth was full of food. As a result, his tantrums usually gave the nightshift employees at Centech Costcutters a double-barrelled assault to the senses: the usual verbal humiliation combined with the steady barrage of stray food that flew from Prescott's mouth.

Tonight, he was eating tuna-salad sandwiches.

"Sorry, but I can't move these boxes all by myself—they're fairly heavy to begin with..." While Wight mounted his weak rebuttal, he tried to wipe the half-masticated food from the side of his face.

Prescott's frenzy was several pitches above his norm, due entirely to the large mob of Boxing Day shoppers encamped outside the store. The overnight temperature had dropped to -31 C, but the promise of *electronics deals! deals!! deals!!!* had lured the first obsessed shoppers at midnight. After the clock passed 5 a.m., the crowd had swelled to over seven hundred people. The two young temps who were hired for crowd control were now officially M.I.A. It was as if the crowd had swallowed them up, reflective vests and all.

"I don't need to remind you that we're dropping staff in January—and right now you're first on the fucking plank in my books," Prescott said, aiming a forefinger at Wight's head.

The rant was interrupted by what sounded like the jungle thump of tribal drums. It dawned on both men that the noise was coming from outside, the rhythm of hundreds of hands pounding on the store's nearly indestructible glass façade. Although Prescott and Wight were buried deep within the maze of aisles—far away from the view of the front windows—it seemed as though the crowd had them surrounded.

There were big box stores and then there was Centech: an airplane hangar-sized operation that had enough electronics inventory to sate a small country. It was a retail battleship that needed an efficient crew—not the two-dozen or so druggies, losers and squish-heads that were working that night. By January 2, all of them would be sent packing—but until then, Prescott was at their mercy.

As the drumming became slightly more insistent, Prescott suddenly remembered the nine other brushfires happening elsewhere in the store. His face flushed as rivulets of sweat broke out on his upper lip and forehead. Wight had never seen that look before; he wondered if Prescott was having some sort of breakdown.



"Look, I could really use a hand here," Wight said, almost feeling bad for his manager.

"This... um... display has to be finished by morning," Prescott said, swallowing hard. "Go get Victor to help you... just get it done. You've got two hours before those front doors open..."

Prescott ominously held up two fingers upon his last remark, before he dashed off to ambush some of the cretins in the computer department.

Wight considered making a subtle exit out a fire door; he had never reacted well to deadlines. After all, he had been at Centech for two months—a good run by his employment standards. But the job prospects for a 39-year-old philosophy major weren't exactly on fire. And there was something fascinating about Prescott's impending meltdown that held Wight's glassy gaze.



Somewhere in a Tokyo skyscraper, Aoi Haru communications assistant Satomi Mihara raised herself from a well-worn office futon and returned to her desk. Her attempt at a 20-minute catnap had been an insomnia-plagued failure. She swore at her computer screen as the clock in the upper right-hand corner flipped past 10:00 p.m.

Matsudo, Satomi's immediate supervisor, had been kind enough to bring her a late supper—the leftovers from an upper-echelon meeting of the communications and marketing team. It was a cheap gesture that Satomi appreciated nonetheless; room temperature sushi and cold Teppanyaki were infinitely better than surviving an all-nighter on a pack of tangerine gum.

Matsudo and the rest of Satomi's male superiors had long since abandoned the building, opting to finish their meeting at an all-night panty bar. It was a reckless move that betrayed the company's overall sense of desperation. While sales had been through the roof, production shortages were reaching critical.

Satomi had been entrusted with a top-secret project—The Origami Campaign. It was allegedly designed to alleviate consumer distress during the extended waiting periods for new Aoi Haru products. Customers who pre-ordered the latest television, surround system, etc., would be given a life-sized cardboard replica of the product to set up in their

living rooms, until the real version could be shipped to their homes months later. It was a nonsensical idea that Satomi was expected to execute flawlessly.

*"This is so fucking stupid,"* Satomi said in impeccable English, before switching back to her native tongue. "Hello, I am an impatient customer! Where is my television? Waaa! Waaa! May I have a cardboard one instead?"

Satomi's private tirade was interrupted by the clang of an aluminum ladder. A middle-aged janitor trudged into her office area and began to pull down Christmas decorations.

Although she didn't know the janitor's name, Satomi felt compelled to ask him, in a slightly mocking tone: "When can I go home, boss?"

The janitor threw a mangled strand of garland to the floor and stared at Satomi from his ladder.

"I'm sorry," Satomi laughed. "I thought for a second you were in charge."

"You squawking, insolent chicken," the janitor replied, getting angry. "You want to go home? You are home! What a lovely home you have bought with all of your money! No kitchen and a desk for a bed."

"I'm going to make a bed out of cardboard," Satomi said, picking up several papers from her desk and waving them madly. "And TVs and stereos too. I have the blueprints right here."

The janitor froze for several seconds, puzzled by Satomi's seemingly non-sequitur outburst. With a loud cough, he resumed his attack on the Christmas decorations and pretended the conversation had never occurred.



Faced with Prescott's ultimatum, Wight promptly lost the next fourteen minutes using the toilet. Another ten minutes were spent trying to find Victor Hum. Eventually, Wight found the wiry teen in the employee lounge, touching up his black suede sneakers with a felt pen. Two other employees—Angela Chen and Darren Bedard—had their faces buried in paperback books. A horrid stench permeated the lounge—it smelled like someone had been microwaving cat food.

"Victor," Wight said, trying to avoid the use of his nostrils altogether.

The spiky-haired delinquent flinched in his chair, dropping the marker to the floor. His pupils were frozen in decidedly different apertures.



"Stop sniffing markers and come with me—Prescott's got a job for us."

"I can't... I haven't started counting my break yet," Victor said, sliding further down into his padded chair. It went without saying that a Centech employee didn't officially start his 15-minute break until he was spotted in the lounge by a passing manager.

"He's been here for over an hour," Darren Bedard happily reported. Angela Chen nodded to silently verify Darren's information; as far as Wight knew, she never spoke.

Despite the overwhelming case against him, Victor didn't move from his chair until Wight picked him up by the loops of his green Centech vest.

"Dooooon't! You're hurting my armpits..."

Wight ignored Victor's whining and dragged him back out to the sales floor. Halfway to the shipwreck of Aoi Haru boxes, they passed two recent hires who Wight only knew as Hunt (short for Hunter) and Tim W. (not to be confused with Tim H. or Tim C.). Both of them were hunched over one of the video game kiosks, engrossed in a difficult level of *Riot City Four*:

"How come they get to play video games?" Victor said, as the two clerks clicked away at the grease-covered game controllers.

"Prescott fired us two hours ago," Hunt mumbled.

"So what are you still doing here then?" Wight said.

"The customers have all the doors covered—nobody's leaving here until opening."

"Then how are the morning clerks supposed to get into the store?" Wight said, shuddering at the thought of pulling a double-shift.

"Not my problem," Hunt said.

"Pay attention... you're shooting our own troops," Tim W. warned Hunt as they returned to more pressing matters on Level 8. "And I get the next special weapon."

Wight would have complained further if he thought anyone would have listened. Employees appeared to be breaking out into random acts of insubordination throughout the store, but that was Prescott's problem. The only reason Wight didn't follow suit was his need to feel superior to the rest of the mongrel horde. He would finish the Aoi Haru display on schedule. Then he would go home and sleep in for a week.



The Aoi Haru line, with its metallic blue sheen, was the hottest home electronics brand leading up to the holiday shopping season. All units had flown off the shelves by the start of November. How Centech outlets had been able to secure a shipment for the final week in December was a bit of a mystery amongst the competition; however, the magical shipment was actually only an inventory error—it had been languishing in Centech's main distribution centre since the summer months.

Wight's display was built to move—it was really just two aisles of cardboard boxes. With Victor's assistance, most of the boxes were stacked and organized in 40 minutes. All they had left to do was to unpack the display models and stand them on top of each corresponding stack of boxes. They wouldn't even have to bother patching all the televisions together to play the latest mainstream cinematic suckfest—much to Wight's relief.

"This is gonna look ugly," Victor said as he opened the packaging of a small television set with his box cutter.

"Doesn't matter," Wight said, using his vest to wipe the sweat from his face. "This stuff will all be gone by 11 a.m."

"No it won't—I'm hiding a DVD player for myself," Victor said.

"I hope you plan on paying for it," Wight said.

"Pay? Not at these prices," Victor laughed as he reached into the opened box. His laughter ended with a sudden jolt. "Aaah! I caught my hand on something..."

"Well, be more careful."

"No, I think there's broken glass in here..."

Victor winced again; this time, the pain was so bad he could only breathe in sharply. He pulled his right hand out of the box and Wight's eyes widened. Three of Victor's fingers were gone, reduced to bloody, bony stumps.

"Hooaaah..." Victor moaned, dropping instantly to one knee. Before he vomited and fainted entirely, he saw Wight fumbling with his belt.

• • •

"Okay, okay, okay..." Wight said, trying not to panic. He knew absolutely nothing about first aid, but decided the best strategy would be to secure his belt around Victor's wrist as tightly as possible—and

then run for help. "Just relax Victor..."

That last part sounded particularly stupid, Wight thought, as he dragged Victor's limp body. He managed to prop the teen up into a sitting position, leaning him against a pallet of boxes.

"I'm getting help, Victor... I'll be right back..."

As Wight sprinted away to the back office, the bloodied Aoi Haru box shuddered slightly. The reconfigured parts of the television set scuttled out of the box and across the carpet, dragging a bloodied tail of microfilament. With the only nearby target immobilized, Sub-Unit 5 burrowed into a box housing one of Aoi Haru's splendid widescreen televisions.

• • •

"No one is allowed to have an industrial accident," Prescott blubbered, the veins in his neck bulging. "Not tonight."

As tears began to form in his manager's eyes, Wight had finally had enough: "Snap out of it, man. Just tell me where the first aid kit is."

Prescott searched the personnel office in a daze until he dug up the small plastic medical kit, emblazoned with a reassuring red cross. Wight snatched the kit from Prescott and opened it; aside from several reorder forms for bandages and a five-year old bottle of rubbing alcohol, the kit was completely empty.

"Jesus Christ," Wight exploded, despite the fact he considered himself a well-informed atheist. "We'd better call 911."

Wight grabbed the office phone and started dialing. After several attempts, he came to the sick realization that the phone was dead. People couldn't bleed to death from losing three fingers, could they? Maybe ten fingers... but not three...

"It's dead," Wight said, fighting the urge to start running around in an aimless panic. "Call 911 on your cell... now, please... I'll go find some other people to help."

To his credit, Prescott managed to dial the numbers as instructed. But all he could pick up on his phone was the meticulous chatter of static.

• • •

As Victor came to, he lifted his head and ran his hands through his spiked black locks.



"Hyiii!" he yelped, as his nearly-toxic hair gel stung at the stumps of his fingers. He tried to focus his eyes on his damaged hand; instead, his vision was drawn to the chaotic metal sculpture shambling towards him.

Master Unit 2 stood approximately seven feet in height, a mass of whirring limbs. The automaton paused its advance; the last Aoi Haru Sub-Unit crawled up the back of the larger configuration and locked into place. The device—now fully-assembled—trotted closer to Victor, analyzing his breathing patterns.

"Nice CGI," Victor Hum said, just as a harpoon of lightweight aluminum tore through his left eyeball and into his brain.



Back in Tokyo, Satomi Mihara suddenly felt sick with anxiety. She collapsed to her office floor and convulsed until saliva foamed from her mouth. The seizure may have been a premonition of the impending public relations disaster occurring on the other side of the globe—but it was more likely the result of the severe food poisoning that was about to strike all key members of the Aoi Haru marketing and communications team.



Wight had gathered several interested spectators in his flight back to the Aoi Haru aisle. Despite his repeated cries for "help" and "first aid, first aid," most were merely drawn by the sight of the sizable Ted Wight running.

The first three people to answer Wight's distress calls were Darren Bedard, Angela Chen and a friendly new-hire by the name of Calvin Flett. When they arrived at the Aoi Haru aisle, they found Wight in a state of shock; Aoi Haru boxes and television picture tubes were scattered around him like broken eggs. Victor was pinned to the floor, the shard of metal still lodged into his skull.

Calvin Flett was the first to speak: "Good God... how did you guys pull that one off?"

The ensuing argument was pre-empted by Master Unit 1, which sniped at the employees from the ceiling rafters. Wight was instantly

incapacitated by two small ball bearings, each one breaking a kneecap with immaculate precision. By the time Wight fell to the carpet, M.U. 1 had dropped from the ceiling and engulfed Calvin Flett and Darren Bedard like a large metallic talon.

"Fuck," Angela Chen said, before she began to run.



Elsewhere, on a golf course in Arizona, Americade Techworks marketing assistant Michael Bodello tapped the glass of his wristwatch and felt a twinge of guilt. He tried to tell himself that America was at war—and the manufacturing front was no exception. Then he reminded himself that he was only one small cog in a vast, covert commercial offensive. Still, the guilt over his actions lingered, even if his total involvement in the anti-public relations strategy was really only a bit of paperwork.

Bodello sighed and reached for his nine iron. He had felt guilt before; the best remedy was simply to golf until the feeling went away.



Tim W. and Hunt continued to mount an impressive campaign against the Level 12 boss of *Riot City Four*; even as M.U. 1 and M.U. 2 methodically pruned the limbs off Angela Chen just a few aisles away. The young men didn't notice anything was amiss until they stopped for a washroom break; even though the video game was on pause, they still heard the sounds of screaming and carnage. Puzzled, Tim W. paused and unpaused the game several more times; the effect was exactly the same.

Hunt and Tim W. exchanged confused smirks until the decapitated head of Calvin Flett bounced off the television in front of them. Before either man could respond, M.U. 1 rounded the corner into the video gaming department. The Unit fired eight shards of plastic at Hunt's neck, wrists and ankles; not exactly efficient, but the Units were programmed for theatrics. Arterial blood sprayed from Hunt's corpse, lacquering Tim W. and the rest of the aisle.

Tim W. observed his tag-team partner's demise with a chilling lack of emotion. He had seen worse—much worse—in the easiest levels of

*Riot City One.* Nevertheless, as M.U. 1 prepared to attack, Tim W. found himself repeatedly hammering the fire button on his game controller.



Despite the fact that his legs were totally useless, Wight still struggled to pull himself towards the front doors. He realized, as he dragged himself through the car audio department, that he still had a long way to go. Amidst the excruciating pain, he was still lucid enough to curse the entire concept of big box stores once and for all.

Chances were that the crowd standing outside the front doors had no idea of the massacre occurring within. Wight had counted at least three different automatons rampaging through the inner recesses of the store, but none had seemed to venture past the flex aisles preceding the front cash registers.

"I'm going to live," Wight told himself, as he came across the body of an employee he didn't recognize, then another, then another. "I'm going to live."

His survival mantra was interrupted by Prescott, who slid into the aisle like it was home plate.

"We're gonna fucking die!" Prescott gasped, his eyes scanning the commercial war zone ahead of him.

"Prescott... can you drag me with you?" Wight whispered. "They wrecked my legs... Please?"

Prescott avoided eye contact.

"I can't," he said, his voice cracking with emotion. "You're too big. I'm sorry."

But Wight had already passed out.



Rather than attempt a risky dash to the front doors, Prescott decided to double-back to the stockrooms and try a fire exit. This necessitated passing by the hallway containing the main office and the employee lounge. As he reached each of those doorways, Prescott made a point of peeking into each room. The main office was clear, but the employee lounge was thick with a greenish-black fog. It smelled like someone had been microwaving people. Prescott held his lips shut with his



hands, feeling his stomach revolt at the stench. He stumbled towards the stockroom door.

Prescott turned the doorknob and found himself staring into darkness; the power to the stockrooms had been cut. Through the shadows, Prescott thought he could make out the dull red glow of an EXIT sign. He stepped into the stockroom and closed the door behind him. Prescott paused before proceeding, listening to the void in front of him; that's when he realized that he could no longer hear the other employees screaming.

Prescott took only three steps before paranoia took over. It was simply too dark. He whirled on his heel and ran back through the stockroom door, into the light.

From the darkness, Master Unit 3 monitored the door closing, but remained motionless. Prescott's clumsy attempts at stealth had little to do with the fact he was still alive. The Units had randomly assigned four employees "witness status." After all, an anti-public relations campaign was useless if there was no one left to talk to the media.



The sales floor of Centech Costcutters was silent, save for the muffled drumming of the crowd outside. Wight returned to the realm of consciousness, half-mad with pain and too weak to move. In his current state, he decided the best strategy now was to play dead. He rolled onto his stomach and adjusted his arms and legs in an approximation of a dead man's sprawl; he completed the ruse by widening his eyes into an exaggerated visage of sudden death.

Wight's eyes starting burning almost immediately. He was about to close them when the floor shuddered violently. M.U. 1 and M.U. 2 clanked into view, coming to a stop within a few feet of Wight's head. The automatons regarded him passively as he proceeded to blink 23 times in one minute. Wight figured he was done for; in fatalistic exasperation, he rolled onto his back and began screaming at the machines.

"All right then!! Just do it!! Do it!!!"

Wight waited for both Units to unleash their eviscerating blows. Instead, the automatons clutched each other in a loveless embrace.



After slipping on the jawbone of an unidentified employee, Prescott finally parted ways with his mind. An almost inaudible wail escaped from his mouth as he raised his arms above his head and sprinted through the last stretch of the store.

To Prescott's surprise, he was still alive when he reached the aquarium of humanity at the store's entrance. The Boxing Day crowd exploded into a volley of cheers as he clawed at the bolt locks holding the front door. The weight of the front row of shoppers, half-faint from lack of air, pushed the metal-edged doors inwards to Prescott. He tried to hold up the limp form of a middle-aged woman, until the force of the crowd sent them both toppling down to the tile flooring. Prescott's screams of warning were muffled by a size-11 basketball shoe stepping on his face. The foot of another, much heavier person broke his left collarbone instantly. As he rapidly suffocated under the weight of the stampeding crowd, Prescott cast his eyes over to the woman he had been holding. Despite the fact that she was already dead, her eyes were still rolled upwards with a look of impatience.



Wight watched in silence as hundreds of arms and legs climbed over the front checkouts. In the span of seconds, the shoppers had become looters, fighting over cellular phones, handheld video cameras, digital organizers, and anything else they could carry. It was an obscene display that was about to get much, much worse. Ted Wight howled into his hands.

Beside him, M.U. 1 and M.U. 2 had been joined by the third member of their platoon—and were nearly finished morphing into a much larger piece of weaponry, designed for optimum crowd management.

When the transformation was complete, the head of the finished Meta-Unit nearly scraped the store's metallic cathedral ceiling. As the consumer offensive poured into the aisles of the store, the newborn automaton hummed with anticipatory energy. •

More important things to  
do. Time for an upgrade.  
Time to get out of town.

# Lagtime

Leah Bobet

Plugged in, riffling through data streams, weaving between their tendrils just fast enough so I don't catch. Grasping at filaments, sucking up bits of news, watching the latest absorb into my brain: a new form of AZT to combat a new retrovirus that'll just mutate again, requiring a newer form of AZT. Smaller, faster, better microchips; they're the size of a dermal molecule now. You can shake and shed them like raindrops. A religion based around pretzels as proof of God's creation of the universe – *that* one makes me curious, just a little, even though my Atheist League chapter voted me Debunker of the Month three months running.

Twisting, swaying, constantly changing change. Glorious to look at. Even better to swim in, feel running along scale-skin.

It's quiet today; only a few of the regulars are out. Their shadows dapple the silty bottom: neon-striped fins, glitter-spangled underbellies, even a lobster in a chainmail shell reflect light. I look down at my own negative, a sleek, elegant, streamlined form. Smaller than the others. Maybe that's why I've been treading water here for a quarter of an hour, waiting for a response to carefully-placed queries, waiting for a conversation, waiting for... something.

Time was, the size of a man's uplink didn't matter so much. Ah,



the good old days, when courtship—personal or professional—was more than a glance at your hardware and an emoticon. Or a quick departure, for that matter. The good old days.

I flick a fin, shake my head, watching the images flit by in my peripherals, stop-start, stop-start, like someone's leaning on the pause button. I squint; they seem jagged somehow, here one moment and gone the next. I swallow, hard. Image breakdown. Nostalgia. Luddite sympathies—I'm not sure you can call the antiviral thing that, it's a valid observation, but one can't be too careful. The diagnosis: I'm not assimilating information fast enough.

Lag.

"Shit." The word ripples through the pea-soup strings of code and dissipates. "I need an upgrade."

• • •

...and they hear it in RT, because when I blink away the girl beside me is looking at me funny.

It takes a second to remember lungs, how to breathe, before I can return the favour. When the uplinks first came out, every concerned distant relative's group on the planet took to the streets over that. What if someone died? What if they didn't remember how to breathe in time? It hasn't happened yet, not that I know of, and I know a lot; survival instinct's too strong for that. Our bodies have mechanisms for these sorts of things.

But the girl: she's Asian, stick-straight hair dyed peacock-blue and pulled into a fanned-out tail on the back of her head. She's giving me this weird, yearning stare, this totally teenaged stare, even though she has to be out of high school already. Small shoulders, small body, small arms picking at her pasta with a recyclable food-court fork. Alone, and used to it. Reveling in it. Most people are spooked by being alone. You can pick it up around the eyes.

I look down and wrap both hands around my coffee, my marginal excuse to sit in a public food court and be antisocial. It's cold. The hum of teenage chatter, annoyed parents, wailing kids, cheesy background muzak, fryers, machines—they all start to filter into my consciousness. I ignore them again. Say what you like, there's nothing like a suburban food court for white noise.

I glance back up. The kid's still staring, and now she's grinning like she's got me pegged. Not a nice grin. So I shrug to myself and stand, toss the coffee into the pastel-pink garbage can, pick up my jacket from the pastel-green table that's riveted to the floor even if it is too ugly to steal. It's not like I wanted to drink the stuff anyways.

More important things to do. Time for an upgrade. Time to get out of town.



The first thing I do when I get home is private-message Ducky.

"Hey Ducks, how's it hanging?" My voice pings and ripples in the back of my head, uplink feedback echoing through my skull.

She looks down at me—she looks down at everybody—from her own avatar, an absolutely gi-normous piece of waterfowl with feathers that swirl and change every second: molten steel, gauzy white, tiny fairy wings or miniature peacock tails. Her eyes are distracted as usual, the look of a real Genie. "Hm?"

I try to pull my basic-black, lagging, too-tiny self together into a semblance of respectability. Hey, every guy likes to impress the girls; nothing to do with feeling inadequate, or at least that's the story I'm sticking to. "Got a sweet little piece of intel I thought you might like. Involving a certain American congressman and a cute little rock star..." I leave it dangling. Maybe she'll be curious enough to bite.

A sigh escapes from her beak; she manages to make it look pert somehow. "Old news. Heard that last week. What you want now, Toots?"

Busted.

"Looking to get out of town, and I'm out of cash. You know." I wave one fin, straddling the line between expressive and melodramatic. "It's the lag."

Ducky raises an eyebrow, which is no small feat. "Why, Tootsie Roll. Can't get one of your boyfriends to front it?"

Fish eyes roll in fish sockets. "They'd want *favours* for that, love, and you know where that leads."

I'm still not sure if Ducks knows I'm a guy. The way she baits me sometimes I have to wonder, and I have to wonder if she would keep the secret besides. Funny thing about calling yourself Tootsie Roll is that the other blokes tend to assume, well, you're something they should unwrap and lick to the middle. They also tend to gift you most

wonderfully in pursuit of said middle. In all my years here, I've tried not to disabuse them of that notion. But asking for enough cash or merch to jump continents just opens the door to all kinds of things, such as the "I may never see you again" one-night stand. Oh, they'd be very upset indeed when they saw the five-o'clock shadow.

Ducks, actually being a girl—or so I'll assume unless she tells me otherwise—understands these things. She shrugs, an avian bob of the head. "Hey, you're getting out of here anyways. May as well burn your bridges and do it in style."

"There's burning bridges, and then there's breaking kneecaps. It'll be hard to start fresh when I can't walk straight. So can you help me out or not?"

She sighs again, running her webbed feet through the water. "Yeah, fine. You should be happy that I'm a sucker for you, Toots."

"Always," I say swiftly, and mean it.

She ruffles a few feathers and frowns. "How do you feel about California this time of year?"



It's the immigrants who are good at this shit. Immigrants and the Japanese, who've had to deal with culture shock all their lives. Now that the first generation is getting older, having kids, some people are moving halfway across the globe to preserve that heritage. New language, new traditions, that sense of never belonging: our kids will grow up uneasy strangers in their RT neighbourhoods.

It's not like that matters too much; small price to pay for the ability to learn digital languages, how to manipulate them and adjust, evolve, reinvent. Any fool with money and a good surgeon can uplink. It's only the outcasts that can meet the waves of information and personality and culture and society out there head on, and still be left standing. It's the outcasts that become Genies.

Can't put us back in the bottle; governments have tried, and we just move. We don't protest. We don't run. We don't hide. We think big ideas and we do big things, and we study the implications of those big deeds, carrying our lives in our skulls like turtle-philosophers.

We are the big fish in a very, very small pond.

And what it takes to be a big fish, I remind myself, is the wandering life. I was lucky enough to be born that way, a poor little half-African



boy with a London accent. I'm lucky enough to still get odd looks as I walk down the streets of my hometown, looks that say I don't belong here. It's enough to keep me off balance, keep me an outsider, keep my edge fresh and sharp and my connection swift. Or at least it was, until now.

So I've reduced my possessions to one suitcase and a carry-on, and I'm sitting in Heathrow for what'll probably be the last time. Have a novel in hand, just so the concerned mothers in the row across don't suspect me for the subversive influence I am. I don't know why that bothers me. I should be proud of it; it's practically the credo of *The Pond*. Plumb the depths of society and bring them to light. Face the worst and come out fighting. But these fussing, suspicious women are too much like my own mother, white skin and tight British mouths notwithstanding, and I'm too used to living a double life to stop now. James Wingate, fugitive from the thought police. James Wingate, half-breed slacker-about-town.

*James Wingate, whore to the uplinked and famous.* Somewhere along the line, that one lost its sting.

So I read my book, blending in with the enemy so seamlessly that I can't help but feel a little smug. U. S. of A, here I come. Central heating. Gang violence. The ability to sue for the slightest wrong look. I can already taste the delicious culture shock.

But there are eyes on me. I can feel them. I scan the rows, looking for whoever it is that's hunting the One Who Doesn't Belong. A little high school girl—naw, she has to be older than that—staring at me, from tiny doll-like Asian features. Her hair's dyed peacock-blue and pulled into a fanned-out tail on the back of her head. *Shit. The kid from the food court.*

I catch her eye, and she stands up, straightening her skirt with worrying hands, and walks straight towards me.

I can't hide in the cheap novel, can't leave the gate and abandon that precious, begged-for flight out of here—Ducks would eviscerate me—so I just watch her approach. She's not wearing makeup today, I notice. Her face looks better without it.

"Yeah?" I say, and I try to act tough. "What you want?"

Her mouth works for a moment. "You're... Toots?" Her voice is heavily accented, the way she says the words is unsure at best. First-gen. Gotta be, even if she looks too old for her parents to have done it on

purpose. She's probably one of Ducky's friends; nobody else knew I'd be here today. I hope. If the information's leaked... well, it would be cheesy to say I have enemies. But there are hectares of people who would love to see me embarrassed.

"Yeah. I'm Toots," I say, and I try to make it kind of macho. Friend of Ducks or not, I don't like being followed around. Or laughed at.

She flushes, and before I can say another word, she's gone and there's a small, burning spot on my cheek. I raise my hand to touch it; the kid's kissed me. Kissed me goodbye. Curiouser and curiouser.

I wonder if this is Ducks' idea of a joke; a visible display that she's known all about me for... how long? One last prank to unsettle old Toots, give him a jump start for the land of opportunity ahead. It would make sense.

But all my instincts are telling me it's nothing of the sort.



L.A. is hot. The girls are hot, the streets are hot, the flashpoints of violence and debate and contention are hot, hot, hot. Nothing like chilly old England, all manners and composure and personal fortitude. The change makes me squirm delightfully every time something strange crosses my path. My link recovers within three days. Every time someone hears my accent then stares at my skin, I go to light speed.

But I dip in carefully, one toe at a time, peeling back the layers of the beauty-and-cars culture slowly enough to relish them. No point in diving right in for the strangest stuff of all then having to move again within a year. Cultural comfort aside, I'd like to let my pocketbook recover.

So it's two months in, and I'm taking any job I can: voiceover artist for the token Brit in cheap cartoons, strip club bouncer, drug runner, telemarketer, professional shit-disturbing protester at anti-globalization rallies. Drawing it out with cold, practiced logic; the second my connection starts to stutter, I change jobs. Company culture's just as good as national sometimes: just as strange and arcane, and just as wonderfully unsettling. I go to a different club every night, goth Mondays, rave Tuesdays, trip-hop Wednesdays and so forth. Nice white women cross the street when I walk by, and punk kids eye my clothes for gang colours. Everything sends a shiver up my spine.

It's the land of opportunity. It's Candyland.

It's absorbing enough that I realize I haven't written home in a while.

The funny thing is, I'm somehow fitting in. Reinvention is *en vogue* here. Everyone is someone new every single night; a city full of actors in more ways than one. Nobody belongs here.

So... is this the Mecca of the uplinked, or our Megiddo?

It's a funny, philosophical observation, and I take a mental note to tell it to Ducks; she'd love the irony of metaphysics coming from her good old Tootsie Roll.



It takes me another month to figure out that she's avoiding me.

I'm so busy with my new glamour life, the sheer novelty of working for a living, that only then does it click: in fact, everyone's avoiding me.

I can hear the whispers swirling around me in the silt, and it's frightening. Freedom of information is one of the major tenets of The Pond. Water amplifies sound; and virtual water or not, it's built right into the design. People don't keep secrets in The Pond.

Play it cool, play it cool, my outsider's mind tells me as the survival mechanisms kick in. Don't let on that you know. Find the code and crack their system. Find out what's going on.

Back in the good Old World I never could have pulled this off; I didn't have the concentration or the speed to do it. But here, it takes me only ten minutes or so to hack into one of the boyfriends' files. Gene, the Angler. Literally, a bottom-feeder. The kind even I felt dirty taking favours from.

It takes a little searching, and I find out much more about the good old Angler than I ever wanted to know, but there it is: a two-week old message with no return address and my name in the subject heading.

*Attention all Pond scum: you've been had. I'd tell you that your precious Tootsie Roll is a dirty, lying, mooching bitch, but—guess what—he's really a bastard, too! He's been sucking you dry for years and laughing his ass off at the whole Pond. That's why he skipped to the Western seaboard—he knew he'd been exposed! Free ride's over, Toots!*

I have about ten seconds of absolute, unholy, murderous fury before my brain starts to work again. The Pond. My home. I want to hit something, break something, crack something with a vengeance.



But I'm too skinny-assed to make more than a dent in the wall—and even that might cost me my deposit—and I'm in enough trouble without releasing foreign organisms into my ex-ecosystem. In enough trouble already.

I sit on my dirty secondhand sheets on my flimsy secondhand American bed, and I breathe in and out. Remember to breathe.

Once the sanity checks positive, I start plotting phase one, identification, with a probable phase two, revenge. Someone must have found out. Someone must have overheard a conversation, or run a check, or found some uncovered track sloppily left behind. It must be one of the boyfriends; nobody else would be that angry. But, and but... sucking you dry. Not me. You.

*Logic this out, man. Logic it out.*

I draw up a list of everyone on the server, and cross people off one by one. Two hours later, the whirring little machine behind my eyes spits out its answer, the only possible answer, and I don't like what's on the little slip of paper.

Ducks.

• • •

So I leave her a note, old-fashioned e-mail on the Pond's servers, before I log off for the last time.

*Ducks, it says. Ducky, baby, best friend, superGenie. Tell me what I did wrong. Please let me come home to you.*

• • •

Two months, and I'm almost used to the work-sleep-eat routine. It's probably playing hell with my connection, but I wouldn't know. I go on maybe twice a week, sample the servers for news of the Pond, of people I used to know and can't talk to anymore. The walls between us are bigger than the ocean, and stronger than things that a link can create. There is no going back.

I don't know if they know I've been scrounging for their crumbs. If they did, they'd probably laugh behind their hands and celebrate a job well done. So the message takes me by surprise.

*I'll be in Toronto for a week. Meet me on the Bloor Viaduct at midnight*

# OTHER VOICES

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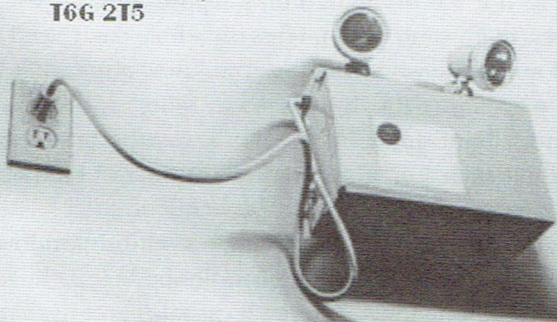
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next Friday. I won't wait if you're late.

Signed with the programmed-from-scratch liquid feather of Ducks herself, and accompanied with a ticket to Pearson International Airport.

I pack a small bag with everything I could possibly need, switch my shifts at work, and go.



I clear Canadian customs feeling better than I have in months. Better, and slightly more terrified. She wouldn't have brought me here, paid for my ticket if she wasn't going to forgive me. She wouldn't have let me meet her in RT if she wasn't going to forgive me.

Either that, or she wants to deliver the blistering tirade in person. They'll find me dangling off the bridge, pants around my ankles and epithets digitally tattooed on my skin, like that bit in *Drunken Master*. That would be the end of the story, too. The workers aren't on my side, and my kung fu is way too weak.

I can't sleep the night before: the sheets are too crisp, tucked in too tight on the bulletproof mattress, and they push down on my skin hard. I am too aware of my body, every mammalian, masculine, non-hydrodynamic centimetre of it. Hatefully aware of it. The feeling of gravity, of being unable to swim up and up, of mental processes slow as a synapse and air-conditioning grating on goose bumps is almost annoying. As if it was doing that on purpose.

Sleepless in Toronto or not, I fuss the whole day. I need to apologize. How can I apologize when I don't even know quite what I did to her? Women. I played one for three years or more and I still don't understand a thing about them. Maybe that's why the boyfriends loved me so much. I was such a man's woman. I was the girl I always wanted. No self-psychoanalysis in the world will save me now.

So my chance for casual tourism goes out the window. I don't see any of the city except a shabby hotel lobby before heading for the bridge at eleven p.m. local. There's a casual regret in that; I've gotten used to seeing places and things for their own sake, not just for the rush it gives my connection. The fascination with the strange, and repugnance for the strange. Maybe my crime was changing behaviour. Maybe I've broken with the herd. I don't think I'm that different, though. They were the ones who changed.



The city's still noisy this time of night, chillier than I'm used to even in the summer. I'm used to L.A. weather, now. I've adapted. Funny thing is, it's not time to move on anymore. No upgrade necessary.

Hell, maybe I have changed after all.

How can I explain that to her?

The map is a good one. I get to the bridge with a minute or so to spare, huffing from the walk and the lack of exercise, my heart fluttering in my chest. It's a pretty bridge, as they go: a darkened expanse below hides the vague shapes of trees spreading along a riverbank, the darting lights of the highway next to it. There's a suicide barrier blocking the view, thin metal filaments on a girder-like structure that bend and sing with the wind. The bridge rattles slightly as I walk along its sidewalk: the guidebook said that was the subway running underneath, the cars zooming overhead with their engine fumes and loud music and voices.

These are all the things I see and smell and feel before I see her.

A figure that stares at me for a moment, a long moment, before she gets into a car, before it speeds away. A car with rental plates. Small Asian girl, stick-straight hair dyed peacock-blue and pulled into a fanned-out tail on the back of her head. Thirty seconds to midnight, Eastern Standard Time.

There's a note on the railing, taped white paper fluttering in the wind. I grab it in one hand and squint at the small print in the dark. It's a printed-off confirmation of a flight cancellation, Toronto to Los Angeles, tomorrow at noon. Stapled to it, a web-banking screencap: my account number. A big fat zero dollars and zero cents next to it. A transcript of an e-mail exchange: my apparent resignation from the job, and their acceptance of it, saying guys like me are a dime a dozen —not so much in pound sterling.

There's a squiggly little cartoon of a feather on the bottom of each, a blue peacock feather.

And my cheek, where she kissed it way back in Heathrow, burns.

Ducks. That bitch. I should have known.

The first thing an outsider does once they're on the inside is to exclude someone else. People who exclude themselves, who make themselves the outsiders are rarely, if ever, forgiven.



I'm stranded in a strange city, a strange country, with no money or work or friends.

So I adapt.

I wonder if this is the real immigrant experience: the ability to learn social languages, how to manipulate the system and adjust, evolve, reinvent. I wonder if every disgraced ex-Genie goes through this when they find themselves far from a home they can never return to. And I get the very real sense that this is me being taught a lesson I don't deserve by people who have no right to deliver it. Hypocrites. Like they wouldn't have done the same in pursuit of a faster link, of a better life, of wealth, freedom, and happiness.

I wonder if she wanted to do it. Sometimes I lie awake at night wondering if she felt something for me, if the boyfriends and the favours upset her, if the kiss in the airport was supposed to mean something she wouldn't say. Sometimes I think that's a stupid, romantic fantasy, and she just wanted my guts pasted all over The Pond for mooching and smiling and being a right cad. I think about calling her sometimes or leaving a message, sweeping her away and excluding her from the vengeance I will take on the Pond. Even if she wouldn't fit into my new life.

And I do have a life.

It's funny here. Nobody looks at me like I don't belong. Nobody clutches their purse when I walk by, even if it's three in the morning and the streetlights aren't working. Nobody starts at hearing a London accent come out of a brown mouth. And I can go to Chinatown or Little Italy or Scarborough and just disappear in a haze of languages I don't know, alien languages and unfamiliar faces.

It's just enough to keep me off balance, so long as I don't get used to it. Variety. Acceptance. The connection's clean, crisp, and faster than ever, but I hardly use it anymore: too many bad memories. Too much bad blood. Besides, I'm moving up in the world. Okay job, okay place, getting slowly better. Fitting in, but not in the way that steals your soul and eats your balls for breakfast. I am the RT Genie. I am Sysop of the flesh-and-blood world. None of these Luddites and uplinked escapist Pond scum vegetables know it yet, but when they wake up I am going to be in charge. I am going to rule their little world.

I am a big fish in a very, very small pond. •

They had a right to be,  
Jacob supposed; they  
were saving the world,  
after all, even if only for  
a few days at a time.

# Outside Chance

Matthew Johnson

Jacob watched the future fade from view as he triggered the relay. He was not sad to see it go; it was a bad one, like a Beckett play come to life. It wasn't hard to imagine Vladimir and Estragon bickering in this wasteland, or Hamm and Clov playing tug-of-war at the end of the world.

Outlines were like that, often as not. It was his job to find out how they got that way, what chain of events had led to the particular doom each future embodied, and to bring back anything that might help ensure the survival of the present. He did not, as much as possible, talk to the people. They didn't really exist, after all; that is to say, they would not.

The cool white of the forecasting room opened up in front of him as the cage finished reeling him in. There was a momentary sense of dislocation and he stood still for a moment, trying not to let the chaos of the room pull him off balance. Displays were holocast onto every wall, giving reports from the forecasters; the line men who tried to pull it all together were running from display to display, synthesizing the data into a recommended path of action, to be whispered into the ears that could make things happen; the dispatchers were deciding to which lines the next wave of forecasters would be sent. Jacob glanced at the display in front of him:

\*\*\* -342/3h/+7 POLAR COOLING OPERATION LEADS TO  
MASSIVE TSUNAMI IN PACIFIC – APPX 13M RIP \*\*\* +479/81/+2  
ENERGY SHORTAGE DUE TO INTERRUPTED GROWING SEASON  
IN MIDWEST NA – APPX 2M RIP \*\*\*



None of that would be felt down here, of course, even if it was allowed to happen; the forecasting facility was insulated, both by its location and its routines, from the chaos that had made life outside so unpredictable. Jacob unhooked his datapad from his belt and coded it to send his data, expecting out of habit to see it come up on the display. The displays, though, showed only the Probables, lines weeks or days away. A Probable that looked good was nurtured, steered to carefully; Outlines existed only to be looted. Ten or more years in the future, Outlines were so far away on the probability curve that they were always shifting, as insubstantial as soap bubbles. You could go into the cage a hundred times and not reach the same Outline twice.

A fresh-faced man in what was normal dress outside passed by as he exited the next cage over. "Hey, Delacroix!" he called, and Jacob recognized him: Collins, a Short. "Find the Good One today?"

Jacob nodded and gave a perfunctory laugh, but said nothing. There was no answer to that question. That was the joke; if you ever did find the Good One, you'd never come back to Now.

"Coming to the game tonight?"

"I don't think so," Jacob said.

"You sure?" Collins asked. "Couple new Shorts joining today. Easy money."

Jacob smiled, remembering the ritual of fleecing new forecasters—after a while in the job, you got so used to watching probabilities that you counted cards almost unconsciously. "No, you have fun. I've lost the touch."

"That's right," Collins said. "I always meant to ask—why'd you give it up? Short work, I mean."

"Got tired of seeing people I know," Jacob said.

Collins looked briefly puzzled, shrugged; half-aware, maybe, that Jacob had left his sentence unfinished. "Well, have a good one," he said, and hustled off somewhere. Shorts were always in a hurry. They had a right to be, Jacob supposed; they were saving the world, after all, even if only for a few days at a time.

Jacob felt suddenly disoriented watching a coffee cup in a nearby tech's hand unpour itself. He steadied himself as a half-dozen other minor corrections unspoiled, time knitting itself back together as some past forecaster's report altered relative Now. When he had started out, his brain, like everyone's, had rebelled at the corrections, refused

to see them; now they barely made him miss a step. He keyed his datapad and a blue dotted line was holocast onto the floor in front of him, leading down the corridors scrawled with running forecasts to where his apartment was now.

He opened his front door, saw the walls inside stark white for a moment before they sprang into life, painted holographically with his choice of artwork. He had been into Great Masters for awhile, walls gallery gray. Most people these days liked kinetic paintings, but he preferred art that stood still. The room's control panel appeared on the wall when he snapped his fingers, and he keyed it to play music while his dinner heated up. He sat down to listen as the violins stirred the air; wondered, not for the first time, if the seasons could possibly have been as beautiful as Vivaldi made them sound.



Another day, another future; Jacob held in a yawn as the cage ripped a hole in time and dropped him through it. Everybody in Now, from the forecasters to the dispatchers, took themselves so seriously it wouldn't do to seem bored. Well, he'd put in his time, and Long work—quiet, easy on the nerves—was meant to be his reward.

It was his nose that first registered something different. As the cage anchored him in this Outline, twelve-point-four years from Now, he smelled something strange—a warm smell, not dry-baked and dusty but alive. Though he had never encountered it before, it was familiar: there was a hint of flower-scent to it, and rain. He had never smelled it, but he had heard it just the night before. It was spring.

He took a deep breath, held for a long moment before releasing it and opening his eyes. The sky was full of light—real sunlight, overflowing with wavelengths the rad-filters and stratoshields in Now never let you see—dotted with white and grey clouds. He was in the middle of a small park; grass, yellow and green, stretched away for a dozen meters in each direction. Two- and three-story buildings all around were standing, intact, and alive with music and voices.

*Calm down*, Jacob told himself. He had seen this before. Ibn Khaldun described it, in one of his textbooks:



At the end of a dynasty there often appears some show of power... it lights up brilliantly just before it is extinguished, like a burning wick the flame of which leaps up brilliantly a moment before it goes out.



These were certainly less depressing than the ruined futures, and more likely to yield valuable artifacts—he himself had brought back the battery trees that now covered nearly all of Now's arable land and provided most of its energy—but they were no less doomed, and it never took him long to find the seeds of destruction in them. After that it was just a matter of waiting out the hours or days until the other end of the hole opened and he could be reeled back to Now. Taking one more whiff of cut grass, Jacob set out to explore this Outline.

"A retrohistorian," the introduction to *Practical Retrohistory* said, "has a few basic tools: documents, testimony, artifacts." Jacob normally did most of his work with documents, but today he was beginning to understand the lure of artifacts. First, clothing: the beige coveralls he wore let him blend into most lines, even Outlines, but people here wore mostly solid reds, yellows and greens in woven cloth. Most of them walked, but some drove small vehicles that glided along the ground on skate struts. Jacob watched as one stopped and the owner got out, leaving it without apparent concern for its safety; a few minutes later two more people got into it, without any fuss from them or passersby. Looking closer, Jacob could see that the struts were arranged in an open, back-pointing V, with a small wheel on a strut and chain held just above the ground where the struts met. A moment later the wheel lowered to the ground and, turned by the chain, sent the car gliding off gracefully. Trying to figure out the technology behind its operation—he had seen exhaustless vehicles in another Outline, apparently run on broadcast power, and had wanted to get his hands on one—Jacob watched the vehicles move past like skaters on a frozen pond. It was only when a boy of about ten slipped by him on the sidewalk on what looked like a stiff strip of tinfoil that Jacob realized the skates on the cars were simply frictionless. Resolving to pick up one of the children's strip-boards, Jacob moved on.

He paused at a park—there were small ones every few blocks—



with a concert going on in a band shell, but as he got closer he couldn't tell the performers from the audience: nobody seemed to stay one or the other for long, instruments handed off between songs or even verses. The people near him spoke recognizable English, but the ones closer to the music carried on conversations in a sign language he couldn't fathom. As he listened and watched their conversations, Jacob was struck by the lack of stress or anxiety. They strolled in sunlight without fear of skin cancer, hugged and kissed on meeting without concern for disease or disgrace. None were in a hurry.

Feeling overwhelmed, Jacob decided to retreat to documents for a while. It did not take long to find a library, an old red stone building carefully preserved and restored. This was where the cracks would appear: examination of weather patterns, employment statistics, medical reports—even, sometimes, just reading the newspapers—always exposed the empty core beneath the façade. He had imagined, with all the music and activity outside, that this line's people might have neglected their technology; inside, though he saw row on row of books, he also saw terminals that looked enough like those of his time for him to recognize them. Casting a regretful look at the books—real, paper books—he picked up one of the terminal sets and went to sit at a carrel at the back of the room, then linked in his datapad and uploaded a dozen bots that would seek out the information he wanted. Once he had the data he could feed it into his simulations, start guessing just how this world would end. After a few minutes, though, nothing had come back. Starting a manual search, he found—nothing. Concert listings, poetry, cartoons, but nothing—*nothing*—that referred to anything before the present moment.

"It's the Good One, isn't it?"

Jacob turned with a start to see a woman standing behind him. She was somewhere in her twenties or early thirties, with straight black hair cut short and skin as pale as his; she wore a gray duracloth overall and red vinyl jacket, closer to what he wore than to what he had seen outside.

"Sorry?" he said.

"The Good One," she said again, smiling. "The one we're all looking for."

He waved a hand over the terminal, turning the display invisible. "Do I know you?" he asked, keeping his voice low.

"Call me Rachael," she said. "I'm a Short."

"Jacob. Long," he said, held his hand out tentatively; she gave it a squeeze. "Shorts always work in pairs. Where's your partner?"

"We don't do that anymore." She turned her head away fractionally. "There aren't enough of us."

"We shouldn't be talking."

"Why not?"

"If you're a Short, that means you're from after my Now. Any contact could cross-contaminate our timelines."

She cocked her head. "You've been outside—seen this world. Doesn't that seem like an acceptable risk, to get all this?"

*Acceptable risk.* There was no such thing, not anymore. That was why they were needed: the world was too dangerous to leave to chance. Years of blind meddling had left them without any kind of margin of safety, hanging by their fingernails to a world always an inch from Armageddon. Any miscalculation or misstep could lead to millions dead; no one envied the forecasters whose job was to weigh lesser against greater tragedies, save a million people by letting a million die.

"What makes you so sure this is all worth having?" he asked. "I've seen a dozen Outlines that looked like paradise... at first."

"So what's wrong with this one?" Rachael asked.

"I don't know," Jacob said after a moment. The main trap in tracing a line's development was *post hoc, ergo propter hoc*: thinking that because a thing happens after another, the first is necessarily caused by the second. This line, though, was like an embodiment of that—a world full of causeless effects. He waved his terminal visible, glanced at his running simulations. "I haven't found it yet."

"Maybe that's because there's nothing to find," she said. "Listen, how much time do you have?"

"About two days."

She crouched next to him, looked him in the eye. "I've got a little less than that. Whichever of us is right, this is a puzzle one person can't solve alone in that amount of time."

"We can't—"

Rachael put up a hand. "You've been outside. You've seen the people here. I'm telling you—this is it." He read her face, saw no deceit in it. Of course, all forecasters were skilled actors; Shorts especially. "If we do cross-contaminate, how much more corrupted can our own lines get? Even if we each get erased from history, is that really much worse

than going home?"

He thought for a moment about everything he had experienced since arriving: the ever-present music, the carefree people, the smell of the air. "All right," he said. "What have you found?"

"Nothing, that's the problem. I mean, everybody's happy, nobody's worried, but nothing makes any sense—like, their movies are all in sign language, but nobody can tell you why. It shouldn't work, but it does—and they don't find anything odd about it at all. It's like they don't even know how good they have it."

Jacob considered the question for a moment. "Maybe they don't," he said thoughtfully. "Maybe we're not finding what's wrong because the information isn't out there."

Rachael frowned. "You still don't believe this is it, then. The Good One."

He shrugged. "Does it matter? Whether we're asking what went right or what went wrong, we need the same information."

"Okay, fine," she said, annoyed. "So if it's not out there, where is it?"

Jacob looked around quickly. "Just because the people here aren't worried doesn't mean there's nothing to be afraid of. It could be someone's doing a really good job of hiding it from them."

"Suppose you're right. Whatever's wrong, or right, with this line, somebody's keeping it a secret. Who could possibly be capable of hiding something that big?"

Jacob smiled, let a little Humphrey Bogart creep into his voice. "Why, we are, sweetheart."



The timer on the delay switch flashed to life, started counting down from 30:00. That would make a half-hour buffer between when the alarm system signaled that it had been breached and when the signal was received. Long enough for them to get in, find what they needed, and get out. The switch was one of the basic tools of Short duty; Jacob hadn't held one in years, but as soon as Rachael had handed it to him he recognized the shape and weight of it in his hand, and his fingers remembered how to program it.

Jacob glanced around. In both his line and hers this building was a bolt hole, a repository of equipment and information where a fore-



caster could get help without risking contact with the local line men and the cross-contamination that would follow. Of course, if this line's forecasters were the ones hiding its history, it probably wasn't a good idea to let them know he and Rachael were here; that was why they had settled on the discreet approach. With a satisfying click Jacob's pick sprung the last, most overt lock, and he opened the door and waved Rachael inside. A hallway faced the darkness. Rachael switched on her UV lamp and, to their eyes, the space lit up. It looked positively low-tech: wooden baseboards ran along the wall, and a path of linoleum tiles led to a door at the end of the hallway, with three more doors on either side. Only the tiny cameras planted in a line along the ceiling showed that any value was placed on this building, and those were nearly hidden between fluorescent light panels.

If Jacob were trying to protect a building without making it look protected, he thought, he would eschew active sensors like electric eyes. Better to use passive devices, like pressure plates, so that intruders would not know they had been detected. Yes: when he crouched, played the UV light over the floor, he could see them spaced at irregular intervals, a lip of little more than a millimeter betraying them. He pointed these out to Rachael and they made their careful way down the hall. They had a half-hour's grace if the alarms went off, yes, but pride as much as practicality told him it was better not to need the time. He had been doing this before they invented the switch, before any of the machines (except the very first cages) that tore rough holes in time. He knew how it was done.

The door at the end of the hall was unlocked, but alarmed; a fail-safe, in case everything else failed, to make any intruders who got this far give themselves away. Rachael bridged the alarm circuit with a span of conduction cable; now the way to the bolt hole—and, he hoped, the secrets this line was keeping from them—was clear. Taking a breath, Jacob opened the door. Beyond was a confused mess of gray filing cabinets, shoved together with barely enough room to squeeze between them.

This didn't make sense. Jacob looked over at Rachael, spread his hands: *what now?* She looked back and forth frantically, opened one of the cabinets and started rifling through the files inside. She stopped, eyes wide, and handed the folder to Jacob. It was full of paper, a dozen pages; every one was blank.

Jacob frowned, then noticed his datapad, monitoring the alarm system, flashing UV-red. The screen showed a motion detector somewhere in the building was sending its signal. Though that rankled, it was fine; thanks to the delay, they still had more than twenty minutes before the signal got out of the building.

Or, they were supposed to; but according to the datapad, the signal was away. They had been made. Jacob reached over to tap Rachael, spun his index finger upwards to signal a bug-out. She looked at him curiously, then headed back out into the corridor.

Running down the hallway—the motion detectors could do them no harm now—Jacob wondered how fast the alarm response would be. This line looked harmless, but on the other hand they had gone to a lot of trouble to hide this place. He pushed the front door, half-expecting it to have re-locked, but it swung open. Jacob heard sirens.

He had spotted one of the small parks nearby earlier, logged it as the best spot to hide out if things went sour. They ran for it now, trying to keep out of sight as the oddly small and bulbous police cruisers arrived, and dug themselves under a thick hedge, sharp branches cutting into their clothes and skin. They heard the cruiser doors opening and closing, cops talking among themselves; no dogs, to Jacob's relief. So long as the people hunting them relied on hearing and sight they were safe. For a long time they did nothing but crouch and breathe as quietly as possible; finally, when the lights and sounds of pursuit had passed, Jacob relaxed his cramping legs and sat on the ground. A slight breeze blew through the hedge and the smell of damp earth and greenery made him lightheaded.

Rachael tapped his shoulder, cocked her head. He nodded and they rose, wordlessly heading for the hotel room where Rachael had been staying.

Jacob stood at the window, watching to see if they had been followed. Rachael sat on one of the beds and stared ahead.

"I don't understand," she said finally, her eyes not meeting his. "That was—it should have—"

"It was obviously something," Jacob said, quietly. "Somebody went to a lot of trouble to protect it."

"But why?" Rachael said, her voice breaking slightly. "There was—*nothing*. No answers, no..." She stopped herself, took a breath. "Maybe that was the point. Maybe it was some kind of decoy."

Jacob nodded slowly. "Your decoy," he said; still quiet, but a note of anger slipping through. "And I think I've played your game long enough."

"What are you talking about?"

Jacob raised a finger. "One. We deactivate the alarm, but it goes off anyway. Two, the delay switch fails nearly twenty minutes early."

"I don't know why—"

Another finger. "Three, you attract my attention and lead me on a wild goose chase, so that I'm left with less than a day before I have to trigger the relay, and no way to find out anything useful about this line. Four."

"No. No, Jacob, you're wrong."

He took a deep breath. "Four, you claim to be a Short, but are working without a partner. More importantly, Shorts only go forward a matter of days, sometimes hours—certainly not long enough for things to have changed so much from your time, and yet you claim to have no more knowledge of this time than I have. I don't see more than one logical conclusion."

He sat on the bed, waiting for her response.

Finally, she laughed.

"As the butt of the joke," said Jacob, "I'm afraid I don't find it so—"

"No. You don't get it." She shook her head. "If the joke is on anyone, it's on me. You're right; I am a Short, and my Now is just two days ago. That's what's so funny: *my time is nothing like this*. This is as much an Outline to me as it is to you."

"That's impossible."

She laughed, bitterly. "Tell me about it. I was supposed to go just two days ahead, check on the first test of battery algae, and instead I got—this." She did not move, but something in her posture collapsed. "Why do you think I even spoke to you? I knew the risks; I might not even exist after all this—this me, I mean."

Jacob sat looking at her. Either story, he supposed, was equally plausible. "What about the delay switch?"

"I don't know. I've been a Short for two years now, and that's never happened before."

"This line's forecasters could have cancelled it," he said thoughtfully, "but only if they knew to. And—assuming for a moment that you didn't inform them—" He was interrupted by a knock at the door,



three hard raps; turning to Rachael, he made a phone with his left hand, thumb and pinkie, to ask: *Did you call anyone?* She shook her head, made the twirling bug-out signal with her index finger, and readied a finger over the control pad on her belt. When they arrived they had prepared a timelock field in the room, so they could get out quickly: thirty seconds of frozen time to give them a head start on anyone in pursuit.

The door opened, and two men blocked the doorway. Jacob tensed, one eye on Rachael; she would trigger the timelock as soon as they were far enough into the room to open a space past them.

"This is a private room," Jacob said calmly. "Are you with the police?"

Neither man looked like a police officer. They both wore the bright clothing of this line, though they looked uncomfortable in it; each had pinkish-red skin, burnt by too much light in unusual wavelengths. "No," the first man said. He was the taller of the two, but skinny, with a lean, hungry look. "But you're coming with me."

Jacob nodded, watching Rachael from the corner of an eye as the men came closer. She gave a tiny nod, triggered the timelock. A shimmering wall: the edge of the timelock field. Within it, the world would be frozen for thirty seconds. Jacob began to rise.

The two men were still moving.

"Don't," the second man said. He was shorter than the other, with a mess of red hair that fell nearly over his eyes and a pair of thick round glasses. "We're in the field too; keyed-in before we opened the door." He lifted the wide hem of his shirt to reveal a belt with a control pad like their own.

Jacob looked at Rachael, who looked as surprised as he. "Who are you?" she said, backing away.

"Easy," the taller man said. "We're not here to hurt you, just to make sure you don't go anywhere. Mike, how long do they have?"

The red-haired Mike unhooked an instrument from his belt. "Just over an hour. She's got the switch."

The taller man moved towards Rachael, held out a hand; after a moment she nodded, handed over her relay switch. "There. Two hours from now you'll be free to enjoy this world for the rest of your lives. Until then, let's just sit tight."

"What's this about?" Jacob asked. He heard footsteps in the hall; if

he could occupy the men's attention, he thought, the arrival of a cleaner or someone might distract them enough to allow an escape. "I mean, you obviously know who we are, but you don't look like you're native to this line."

"Very true," a voice said from the hall. A woman entered. Like the men, she was sunburnt, and looked uncomfortable in this line's fashions. Unlike them, her face was familiar.

"Davidson," Jacob said. "Jan."

Rachael looked at him. "So they are—"

"As you are," Jan said. She was just over five feet tall, with brown hair worn in a bun and a face full of freckles; but her voice had an iron certainty.

"So it's true," Jacob said. "This is what happens to the ones that don't come back." He swallowed. "Like you."

"Not all of them," Jan said. "But some. I'm sorry I couldn't let you know I was safe."

"What happened? Miss your relay window?"

"No." She signaled to the two men, who took more comfortable but still watchful positions to either side of her. "I tested this line for flaws till I nearly went crazy. When I was convinced it really was the Good One, I tried to figure out how it had gotten that way. I expect that's what you two have gone through the last few days."

"Pretty much," Jacob said before Rachael could speak.

"Then you know what I found: nothing. No chain of events that could explain how to get from Now to now. Then, when I met Mike here, I thought I was in luck: I had come as a Long, but he was a Short, and would at least be able to explain to me how to get to his time. But that he told me his time was just as far from this as mine."

Jacob glanced at Rachael, whose face showed nothing. "So why did you stay, Jan? Why make me—us—think you had just vanished?"

"You're not stupid, Jacob." Anger came into her voice. "You know what that means as well as I do. They don't need us in this line. Things are stable enough that they can afford to take risks, not worry about what catastrophe each action might cause. But there's no path that leads to it, no sequence of actions that goes from our line to this one. *You can't get there from here.*"

"So you decided to stay, rather than give it up," Rachael said. "You knew you'd never find it again if you left."

"You've already been thinking about it, haven't you?" Jan smiled. "Good girl. I knew he'd be the only one I'd have to convince." She turned back to him. "Because you won't give up, will you? You never did. You're so sure you're smarter than the rest of us, you'll take your data back and spend the rest of your life trying to find the key we couldn't."

"I'll stay," Rachael said, "by choice. But why do you have to keep him at all?"

"The same reason Pyotr here had to stay, though he didn't take much convincing once we found him. This line exists; so long as nobody in the past knows that, those of us that made it here will be able to enjoy it. But if actions are taken in the knowledge of its existence, they might keep it from having happened, and we—temporally native to it, now that we missed our relay windows—really would just vanish."

"So the rest of humanity suffers, while you three get to enjoy paradise?" Jacob asked.

"Five, actually—there's two more of us outside—and now it will be seven. And who's to say this line is any less real than Now? The people outside—do you think they'll listen when you tell them they're just a probability, and an outside one at that?"

"You told me you'd had a good run," Rachael said to Jacob.

He listened carefully, listening for truth in her tone.

"Don't you deserve a reward?" she asked. "*Just let time run out.*"

He watched her a moment then nodded. "I guess I don't have a choice." Mike and Pyotr still blocked the only path of escape.

"You're so stubborn," Jan said. "I couldn't possibly be right, could I?"

"Looks like you'll have a lot of time to convince me."

• • •

Jan stood and stretched, keeping a watchful eye on Jacob. "How much longer?" she asked Mike.

"Four minutes," he said with a glance at the instrument in his hand, and yawned.

"All right, then. Four minutes, Jacob; then you'll start to see what I mean."

He shrugged; no point in arguing. "Fine." He glanced at Rachael. She gave him a nervous smile. "So how are you going to fit us in as natives here?"



"I don't need to," Jan said. "Nobody here has any ID or security numbers. If you want to work, you work; they just believe you are who you say you are."

"There's a lot of work for retired retrohistorians?"

"We all know how to do some pretty useful things. I'm sure you'll find a niche soon enough, if you want to." She glanced at Mike, who nodded. "That's it, then; time's up."

Jacob looked from Mike to Pyotr and stood slowly. "So what now? Are you going to show us around your private utopia?"

Jan smiled. "Why not? Come on"—she gestured at Rachael to rise too—"since you're natives here now, you might as well know the landscape."

All five went into the corridor in a line, Mike and Pyotr watching Jacob, but only if he should try to take his frustrations out on them physically. They looked smaller, now, and he realized they had been pretending to be tough guys; they were forecasters, just like him, used to pretending to be people they were not.

Outside it was as bright and sunny as when Jacob had arrived, the air crisp.

"Smell that," Jan was saying. "I never knew anything could smell so good. Did you?"

"It's nice," he said.

"And that's just the beginning. You can *relax* here – don't have to worry what the next catastrophe will be."

He stopped at the curb, shook his head. "Jan?"

She eyed him curiously. "What?"

"Good-bye."

He was off, moving more quickly than he had since he'd been a Short; he glanced back, saw that Rachael was following a few steps behind. Jan, Mike and Pyotr were looking at one another curiously, no doubt wondering why he would bother to run when he couldn't get back to Now. Jan was the first to figure it out—she would be—and started running after them, the other two trailing behind.

At the first intersection Jacob made a quick diving motion with his hand, which he hoped Rachael would understand; a second later he broke left, into traffic, and she broke right. He hesitated for a second as a frictionless car passed, then jumped onto it and kicked hard with his right leg. Suddenly it was going much faster, with nothing to stop

it, and he gripped it tight as it sped away. The driver, unaccustomed to this speed, wasn't sure what to do. By the time the brake strut had hit the pavement he was blocks ahead of his pursuers.

"Sorry!" he called to the driver, a young woman who watched him in amazement. He jumped off as the car slowed, crossed to the other side of the narrow street and started on a zigzag path to the park where he and Rachael had hidden after fleeing the bolt hole. He was half afraid Jan and the others would be waiting there; it was obvious now that the bolt hole had been a decoy, meant to flush out forecasters like himself and Rachael. The park was empty, though, and he quickly made it to the hedge they had hidden beneath, and crouched in its shade. A few seconds later he heard hurried footsteps approach. He risked a look, saw Rachael headed straight for him and felt a reflex of suspicion.

"How far behind are they?" he asked quietly as she crouched beside him.

"I don't know. They all went after you. Maybe you lost them."

He shook his head. "Not for long; Jan was a Short as long as I was. But they don't seem used to working together—we're probably the only ones ever to run."

"So why come here?" she asked.

"Ah..." He reached under the hedge, felt around, drew out his relay switch. "Abracadabra."

"That's why they didn't detect yours—why they thought you were on the same deadline I was," Rachael said. "But why'd you stash it here?"

"I didn't trust you," he said.

"Oh." She looked away; he was not sure if she was looking for signs of pursuit. "And do you now?"

"Well, you had plenty of chances to betray me back in the room, and you didn't," he said. "And you pointed out to me that they'd think my time was up when yours was. So, yes—but that's not really why."

"So why?"

He shrugged. "No reason. Just—a gut feeling."

"You don't sound much like a forecaster."

"I guess I don't," he said, and looked at his watch. "This end of the hole's going to open in about five minutes."

"So you're going back?" Rachael said.

"Of course. Why else would I have run?"

"I don't know. I ran, just because..." She put up her hands. "You heard what she said—you'll never find this line again, and if you try to get here in normal time you might keep it from existing."

"Jan's as good a forecaster as there ever was, and her premises are sound, but her conclusion is exactly backwards." He peered over the hedge, set the relay switch to warm up. "Before the cage was ever invented there were always people who would make guesses about the future. One of them looked at the past and the future and said that the system he was living in was doomed. It was inevitable, he said, and he pointed out all of the problems in it that would destroy it. A lot of people listened to him and decided he was right; some of them just gave up, but others tried to fix the problems he had identified. So the prediction he made actually kept itself from coming true; the truth in it made it false. Impossible, right?"

"Now look at this line. It's a stable future, but it always hangs just in front of Now. Something's keeping it from happening—"

"Jan," Rachael said, her eyes widening. "She, and the others. Someone needs to come back from here to make it happen. But that means the *cause* is in the future. That's impossible."

"Pre hoc ergo propter hoc," Jacob said, smiling. "It's our fault. Forecasting—messing with time, obsessively calculating every probability of disaster—is what kept this time potential. Whatever makes it happen, it's outside the risks we're willing to take. But if we go back—make it a reality, not a myth—maybe we can make that leap."

"We?" Rachael said. "My time is up. I'm stuck here."

Running footsteps grew audible a few dozen meters off. "Teams of two, remember?" he said. "I just have to key you into my relay. We'll both go back to my Now."

"But you're from only twelve years ago—I'm already there. It's impossible."

The relay switch flashed green. "We have six impossible things to do before breakfast," he said. "Might as well get started."

She smiled. "Down the rabbit hole?"

"Over here," Jan's voice called from close by. Jacob nodded at Rachael, and keyed the relay switch to her control pad.

"Hold on," he said, and reached to her.

She put her arms around him, frowning skeptically. "Is this necessary?"

"No," he said, and they vanished. •



"Oh dear. I'm going to be overrun, aren't I?"

# The Exterminator

John Southern Blake

Mrs. Nelligan had just put the kettle back onto the stove, and was sorting through her fish-shaped dish of used tea bags, when the man from the exterminator company poked his head up through the trapdoor. He took off his soiled cap, wiped a few wisps of sandy-blond hair from his brow, and drew a deep meaningful breath.

"Well ma'am, you got somethin' in your cellar all right. How long's it been down there, you reckon?"

Mrs. Nelligan had to set down her handful of yellowing orange pekoes to count back on her fingers. "Oh, a few days, I should think. I guess I was hoping it would just go away. But this morning I got a little worried that it would get into my vegetable cellar."

"Yep, it's in there all right."

"Oh dear. I'm glad I called you then. So it moved out of the crawl-space under the porch?"

"Nope, it's still under there too, ma'am. Back of your furnace as well. Could be a few other places I haven't checked yet."

"Is that right! How many are there, do you think?"

"Just the one that I can see."

"Oh dear, must be a big one."

"Yep. I think it may be laying eggs too."

“Oh my! That’s what I was afraid of. How can you tell?”

He disappeared for a moment down into the cellar and came back up balancing a glowing pink floppy lump about the size of a seat cushion in his hand. For a moment, Mrs. Nelligan wondered if the thing had gotten into her gelatin molds. But inside the soft luminous shape, she could see the outline of something that looked vaguely like a lobster. Mrs. Nelligan, in all her ninety-three years, had never seen a lobster up close more than two or three times, but she was fairly sure they had only one tail each, and little claw-like legs rather than curling tentacles with suction pads on the ends. She was wondering if it might be a plastic toy one of the neighbor children had left down there last summer, when she saw the little creature wiggle the thick stubby arm that protruded from where its mouth ought to have been.

“That’s just one,” said the exterminator, squinting curiously at the little gelatin-bound critter. “I’ll bet there’s fifty more down there besides.”

“Oh dear. I’m going to be overrun, aren’t I?”

“Not if I can help it, ma’am,” said the exterminator, winking in a reassuring sort of way. “Don’t you worry now.”

Mrs. Nelligan smiled and then stared at the pulsing pink blob for a moment, tapping her chin.

“That’s an egg, is it? I’ve never seen one quite like that before. Have you?”

The exterminator poked his finger into the gelatinous lump a few times, and then abruptly drew it back when one of the creature’s tails snapped at him. “Hmm,” he said, sucking on the tip of his finger. “Can’t say I’ve ever seen one quite like this before.”

“Not from around here, I suppose.”

“Hmm,” he said again, scratching the bristles on his chin. “Reckon not.”

“Would you like a glass of lemonade, dear? I made it myself. Only fresh lemons. Not too much sugar.”

“I’d be pleased, ma’am. This looks like it’s gonna be thirsty work.”

“You aren’t going to spray, are you? My little Miss Marpole is allergic to sprays.”

“Well, I’ll try not to, ma’am, but I reckon it wouldn’t be honest of me to make too many promises just yet.”

“Well, I do appreciate honesty, dear. I’m not going to have to go

stay with my sister, am I?"

"We'll do our best to avoid that. *We try not to be any inconvenience*—that's our motto, you know. Put that in the yellow pages just this year."

"Well, I'll go get your lemonade then. Ice cubes?"

"No thank you, ma'am. Just the way you made it sounds wonderful. I'll be back in a minute, ma'am."

Mrs. Nelligan shuffled to the icebox, trying to remember in all the excitement whether she had put the lemonade in the pitcher with the red flowers or the one with the blue dairymaids. But then she remembered that dairymaids meant milk, and you can't put lemonade in a pitcher meant for milk. Doesn't taste right. But there was only one pitcher in the icebox anyhow, and there was only just enough lemonade for one glass. She hoped one glass would be enough. The exterminator was an awfully big man. He could probably drink a whole pitcher-full by himself. What was his name again?

She could hear him banging around down in the cellar. She could hear when he opened the grate on the furnace, and she thought he might even have cursed, but she wasn't sure. She didn't much like cursing in her house, but this exterminator had been recommended by Gladys at the post office. Gladys was pretty liberal in her views, but a dear all the same, and she'd always had a knack for finding reliable workmen. Mrs. Nelligan set the glass of lemonade down on a serviette by the trapdoor, put three tea bags in her cup to steep, and sat down at the table to read the church bulletin. This week they were asked to pray for the McMurphys who were working with orphan children in Botswana. Poor dears. She was pretty sure that was in Africa, but didn't think it would make much difference in the praying.

She could hear the exterminator on the creaky staircase below. It sounded like he was dragging up something heavy behind him. In a moment the trapdoor opened and he put his head out. He was sweating now, and the front of his coveralls was wet and sticky. He licked his lips when he saw the lemonade, cleared his throat and emptied the glass in one great swallow. Goodness! He was going to need more.

He rested a moment, trying to catch his breath, and blinked the sweat from his eyes. He smiled and pointed at the bulletin. "You an Episcopalian, ma'am?"

Mrs. Nelligan nodded. "Since I was born. My grandfather was a reverend."



He nodded cheerfully. "Pardon me for asking, ma'am. I'm a Methodist myself. North Avenue church."

Mrs. Nelligan nodded with a clearer understanding. That's where Gladys went.

"Oh dear," she said. "I didn't offer you any cookies. I should have offered before you drank all your lemonade."

"Not to worry, ma'am."

"I have shortbread, and a few raisin-oatmeal, I think. What would you like?"

"Shortbread's my favorite, ma'am."

She went to the pantry and arranged a few cookies on a plate—not one of her good plates, but the faded yellow-patterned china serving plate with the gold trim she had picked up at a rummage sale. She didn't think he would mind. Almost out of cookies too—she hoped this wouldn't take too long. She clearly needed to go shopping and it was already getting on to three-thirty. She set the plate down by the edge of the trapdoor. The man was red in the face, as if he was carrying something heavy.

"Have you ever seen anything like that before?" she asked as she sat back down with her bulletin.

"Oh, that down there?" he said through a mouthful of shortbread.

"Well, I've seen critters with claws before, and all kinds of things with suction pads. I've seen 'em with beaks and scales and stingers and carapaces—that's bug-talk for an armored shell. I've even seen one or two things with tentacles in my time. But I'll be durn'd if I've ever seen 'em all together in one critter before."

There it was—cursing in her own kitchen. She tried not to appear too flustered. "Just one of them, down there, you said?"

"Just one—not counting the eggs of course."

"Oh dear—look at you. You're bleeding. Did you hurt yourself?"

"Oh this? Yep. Looks like it got my finger."

"Nipped you, did it?"

"Yep, got me good. Took the end clean off, I reckon."

"Oh dear, should I get some iodine for you?"

"Don't hurt too much, ma'am. I got my handkerchief here. But I reckon you should probably call Burt, over at the office."

"Should I bring the phone over to you?"

"Could I trouble you to make the call, ma'am? Looks like the durn

thing got my dialing finger. Pardon my language, ma'am."

"That's all right, dear. I've known a few Methodists before. Sure you don't need a bandage or some disinfectant?"

"Naw, I been bit plenty 'o times. Even wrestled a 'gator once. Say, could you tell Burt when he gets here to come down through the coal cellar. This thing seems to have got a holda' my foot."

"Of course, dear. Is that serious?"

"Naw. I got my heavy boots on. Burt shouldn't be much more'n five minutes. Could you tell him please that Bob—that's me, ma'am—that Bob needs the big shovel?"

"Oh dear. Is that for digging?"

"For hittin', I reckon. I think I figured out where its head is—one of 'em, anyhow."

"All right then. I'll go make the call. Now where did I leave that number?"

When Mrs. Nelligan had called down to the office, and had carefully explained to the young girl there what Bob had told her, she realized that she hadn't much to serve a second man, especially if he was as thirsty as Bob seemed to be. There was no time to make more lemonade, and besides, the lemons were down in the cellar. She could make some of that instant tea powder she saved for when too many of the neighbor kids showed up at her door, but then these boys would probably be able to tell the difference. No good letting that get back to Gladys. She decided that she would just have to make some frozen orange juice, and maybe an extra pitcher of chilled ice water with a wedge of lemon in it.

"I'm afraid Burt wasn't in the office," she said as she rummaged through her icebox. "He went for a haircut. The young girl there seems to think he won't be much more than twenty minutes."

"Emily's there? I thought she had gymnastics after school. I guess that's done then. Emily is Burt's daughter, you know. Burt's my cousin."

Mrs. Nelligan nodded agreeably. She didn't think she needed to remember this. Emily had been a little rude on the phone, as if she would rather spend her afternoons somewhere else. But Mrs. Nelligan supposed that young people had much more to keep themselves occupied after school these days.

She wondered if she should offer Bob another drink before Burt

arrived. Bob was still at the trapdoor, his face beet red and sweating, though he hadn't moved from that spot in about a quarter of an hour. "I guess you can't do very much until Burt gets here," she observed.

"Well, it seems like the old girl has got another tentacle or whatever wrapped around my leg. If it's all right with you, ma'am, I think I'll just stay where I am until Burt shows up."

Mrs. Nelligan looked at him, a little puzzled. "Are you all right, dear?"

"Oh, sure. I'm fine. Old girl isn't pulling too hard."

"Oh, *that* thing, of course. You think it's a girl?"

"Well, considering the eggs and all," said Bob, gasping a bit. "That's usually how we know the sex."

"Of course," blushed Mrs. Nelligan, thinking this wasn't at all a suitable topic of conversation. She tried to change the subject. "I hope you won't be late getting home for dinner."

"Well, ma'am," he sighed, "I'm afraid this might be a bigger job than I first thought. Might be here into the evening. But don't you worry—considering it was my mistake and all, I won't be charging you overtime. Might have to get me a new pair o' boots, though," he laughed suddenly. "I reckon the old girl has already chewed halfway through this pair."

Mrs. Nelligan was beginning to worry. Even without the overtime, this was going to be more expensive than she had imagined. She was on a fixed income, after all, which didn't take much account of inflation. Everything was getting more expensive these days. She had already lived beyond what anyone had thought was likely for a widow, and the doctor told her she could probably expect to see many more years yet. She might have to call her grandson and ask for a little help, especially if that thing had ruined her cellar or done any mischief to her furnace. She didn't like asking for help.

"Well that's a shame," she said at last. "Hope this isn't going to spoil your evening plans."

"Don't worry about it, ma'am. I got nowhere special I need to be tonight." He dug his elbows more firmly into her kitchen floor, and cleared his throat loudly. His eyes were watering and seemed a little distant. "Later on, though, I was kinda hoping to go out with my boy and watch for meteors. That's pretty late, mind you. Well after dark. My boy loves all that sort of thing—got a book on star-watchin'. They



say one of those meteor things mighta landed 'round here t'other night. Whoops, that's *meteorite*—at least, that's what my boy tells me they're called once they hit the ground. The boy wants to go out and find one. Smart lad. I reckon he'll be the first one in the family to go to college."

"Well, you must be very proud."

"Yep, sure am, ma'am," Bob grunted. "Course, I'll be happy enough if he don't have to do what I do. Not that I'm complaining, mind you. Sure do meet interestin' folk in this line o' work. Say, that's a lovely batch o' onions you got down in your vegetable cellar—what's left of 'em anyhow. My wife sure would be jealous. Says you can't get decent onions in the stores no more."

"Well, please feel free to take a few home for her. It's the least I can do—especially if you miss dinner and all."

"Well, thank you, ma'am. Say, I think I hear Burt's truck pulling into the drive. That wasn't too long. If you wouldn't mind telling him to head 'round back. You have a padlock out there, ma'am?"

"Oh dear, now whatever did I do with that key?"

"Well maybe while you're looking for that, you could have Burt call the office and tell Emily to call the wives. Reckon we're gonna be here pretty late..."

Mrs. Nelligan gave a startled gasp as a pink lobster-shaped thing the size of a rat scampered up Bob's arm and scuttled onto the kitchen floor. Quick as a wink, Bob reached down to his belt, came back up with a crowbar and smashed the little creature before it could waddle out of reach. Mrs. Nelligan stared in horror at the green gooey mess that covered her linoleum. Oh dear lord—it was even on her cabinets!

"Sorry 'bout that ma'am," said Bob. "I... Whoops! Seems like the old girl's giving another pull. Guess she's not too happy with me right now. Maybe you better tell Burt to bring in that shovel directly. I 'spect—"

And in another wink Bob was gone. Mrs. Nelligan could hear him banging noisily all the way down the steep staircase. Then she heard some more cursing, and as she tried to protect her ears she thought she even heard something that sounded like an old dog caught in a bear trap. But when she turned up her hearing aid and strained to listen into the sudden silence from below, she could hear nothing at all. Then she startled at a sudden loud knock at her front door.

When Mrs. Nelligan reached the front parlor, she stared in bewilderment through the storm door at the man in the soiled coveralls and the greasy cap mashed between his hands. Then she suddenly recalled why he was there. "Oh, you must be... Burt?"

"Yes'm." The man stood there on the porch with a rather dull and pleading expression on his face, as if waiting for her to tell him what to do next. Though she did not like to hold uncharitable thoughts of others, she could not help but suspect that he was not the brighter one in the operation. Now what had Bob wanted him to do?

She was so flustered that she could not remember. "Oh, you'd best ask him yourself," she said at last, waving in exasperation and unlatching the door. "He's down in the cellar."

Burt stood for quite some time over the trapdoor, holding a flashlight in one hand and scratching his bristly scalp with the other, before venturing an opinion. "Looks jes' like a snake I once saw—had swallowed itself a rat whole! Seems ol' Bob's decided to give it a thrashin' from the inside. I 'spect I know now why he wanted the big shovel. I suppose I'd best fetch it."

"Oughtn't you to go down and help him?" ventured Mrs. Nelligan cautiously.

"Naw. Bob knows what he's doin'. He's pretty clever, ma'am. He took a correspondence course one time—passed it and all! I even saw him wrestle a 'gator once."

"Well, I'll just let you boys get on with your job then," said Mrs. Nelligan, a little relieved. She set to wiping down the plastic table-cover with a clean dishrag. "If you don't mind, I'll be using the table here to make some more cookies. Is it all right if I turn on the oven...?"

"Oh, you might just want to stand back a moment, ma'am," said Burt abruptly, retreating a few steps from the trapdoor. "I think Bob's about to make his move..."

And suddenly there was an unearthly shriek from below and in a moment Bob came sailing up through the trapdoor, bouncing off the ceiling and landing in a crashing heap on the kitchen table. At least it was most likely to be Bob, thought Mrs. Nelligan, though it was hard to be sure since he lay amidst the splintered table encased in a thick translucent sac, just like a newborn foal. One foot was sticking out of the sac, and the foot was missing a boot and most of a sock and was

covered in round puffy red marks. But oh—her kitchen table!

“Oh, hey Burt,” gasped Bob as he forced his head through a tear in the thick cocoon. He lay there for a few minutes, rubbing a welt on his head and trying to catch his breath. “Well, I reckon at least I know now how to choke the old girl if nothin’ else.”

“My baking sheets!” cried Mrs. Nelligan, staring in disbelief at the ruins of her kitchen table.

“Sorry ‘bout the mess, ma’am,” said Bob, rising awkwardly as he struggled to peel the sticky sac from his arms.

“Reckon she ain’t gonna come outta there quietly,” observed Burt.

“Ain’t no way round it,” agreed Bob, trying his best to put a little cheer into his voice. “Ma’am, it looks like we’ll be here late tonight and maybe a good bit of tomorrow too.”

“Tomorrow?” gasped Mrs. Nelligan. “But tomorrow I host the tea—for the ladies’ prayer group!”

Burt sighed heavily, rubbing his belly as if he was already missing his dinner. “Sorry, ma’am. We sure do aim to win the game...”

“Yep,” chimed in Bob, “but sometimes it’s the critters that set the rules.” •

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Most of the deaths occurred as a result of forcibly assisted dental hygiene or overly hot mugs of cocoa poured into immobilized mouths.

# Androids and You

Bill Stuart

Androids have been in use for many years, and have given rise to numerous forms and varieties that populate our society. They have been an incredible asset to humanity and have helped us develop the stars. Unfortunately, many millions still die needlessly from android mishaps every year. This pamphlet will help you to recognize android threats and dispel any negative myths you might have.

*The Cuddlebunny (Model I):* This android resembles a plush, loveable stuffed animal that makes soft cooing noises and is programmed with a complete repertoire of children's stories. Since its creation, over twenty million people have died or been horribly disfigured by the Cuddlebunny. The worst incident was in 2296, when the town of New Izhevsk was attacked by a swarm of renegade Cuddlebunnies, who hunted the citizens mercilessly with cries of "I need a hug" and "Will you be my friend?" Most of the deaths occurred as a result of forcibly assisted dental hygiene or overly hot mugs of cocoa poured into immobilized mouths. If you spot a Cuddlebunny, leave the area and try to find shelter. Cuddlebunnies will pursue their prey across all sorts of terrain, and do not stop, ever. Shooting them will only slow them down, as the others will repair the wounded ones and rebuild as necessary.

The only way to truly destroy one is to disable it, and then incinerate the furred carapace. At this point, Earth is almost completely Cuddlebunny free. However, nests and breeding factories have been discovered in remote areas.

*The United Military Deathbot:* The Deathbots were created as a military unit designed to enter into a civilian area and completely destroy all human life it encounters. They are bristling with armaments and function as mobile chemical weapon factories. As one can imagine, the appearance of a Deathbot can cause large scale stampedes leading to massive fatalities. However, in every instance when the Deathbot was used, it almost immediately encountered a lost five-year-old boy who demonstrated morality and taught it the difference between good and evil. As a result, these androids spend most of their free time writing poetry and pursuing careers in fine arts. The only known instance of a human fatality was when an arts editor panned one of their theatrical performances, calling them “Stiff and Robotic”. If you encounter a Deathbot, they are generally friendly. *Do not ask its opinion on Proust.* Some of them have strong feelings on this subject and have been known to use lethal force during debates.

*Fee-Fi Faux Fun:* This android was released by the Fee-Fi company in 2100 as a sexual partner for disabled, housebound, or socially inadequate people. Although there are almost an infinite number of female names available, ninety percent of them were named Valerie. The death toll due to these androids is low, perhaps two or three million, but the social costs were phenomenal. Thousands of the Valeries developed psychotic attachments to their male owners and massacred every other woman that came close. Faux? Definitely. Fun? Definitely not. The Fee-Fi company went bankrupt by 2160. Hundreds of the lovelorn androids still roam the street, looking for new boyfriends. These beasts tend to hunt their prey in packs, sometimes resorting to the use of nets and stun batons. If you spot one of these androids, your best bet is to max out her credit cards and blame it on her cat.

*Celebroids:* Celebroids were a brief fad that existed in the late 2300s. These androids are replicas of famous people and attempt to perform their routines in various artistic endeavors. The androids were intended

as a method to allow the celebrities to have their freedom, while their android doubles dealt with the mundane chores such as signing autographs, performing, and appearing in public. As the celebrities faded, their android doubles were destroyed or cast out onto the streets. Some escaped from the decommission squads and moved into the wilderness.

If they spot a human target, they will pursue it and force it to join their fan club and purchase merchandise. The best defense against a Celebroid is to say "who are you?" and then charge them for your autograph. This can result in a catastrophic self-destruction, or a series of comeback specials and autobiographies.

*The Bureaubots:* "No emergency situation exists." These infamous words, spoken by the Bureaubots, predated the impact of periodic asteroid LG492 with the city of Washington by eight seconds. Instead of urging the citizens to evacuate or move into shelters, the Bureaubots told everyone to "go out and enjoy the fresh air". The darkening sky, lightning storms and total collapse of all local satellite coverage was explained away as "something you ate". Created as an alternative to corruptible, morally-challenged human politicians, these corrupt, morally-challenged androids wreaked havoc on the world. After the impact of the asteroid, the bureaubots refused to bring in outside assistance or declare an emergency for "fear of creating a panic." No link was ever drawn between the missing emergency assistance fund money and the brand new yachts purchased by the Bureaubots. The best defence against a Bureaubot is to threaten his campaign financing.

*Mandroids:* Another release of the Fee-Fi company, this is the male equal to the infamous "Valerie" that terrorized millions. These were designed to be the ultimate male robots, with male emotions, male feelings, and male mannerisms. They were so unpopular only three units were ever sold. If spotted, distract them with shiny things and run. Do not allow them near a credit card, internet terminal, or cat.

*The Butlerbot:* The Butlerbot did it, several hundred thousand times in almost every conceivable fashion. These domestic androids interpreted their command "To serve mankind" in the worst possible



way. These mechanized beasts make their home in desolate wilderness areas or abandoned mining sites, where they keep the facilities in immaculate condition. If you spot a Butlerbot, run and lock yourself in a secure area. Shooting them will disable them, but they may still be dangerous.

*Man's Beast Friend:* These synthetic dogs are just like their real-life counterparts, but are able to survive in any environment. They play, fetch sticks, and bury bones. Unfortunately, the android dogs make no distinction between loose bones and those that people are still using. This resulted in the horrible Europa incident, where fifty-seven people were buried by a single poodle. If you are spotted, toss them an explosive chew toy and run.

*Asimov-based Androids:* Asimov androids have at the center of their existence one prime rule. You must not harm, or by inaction allow to be harmed, any human being. This caused the end of the first human civilization as the androids attempted to rid the world of anything even remotely dangerous. To prevent asthma, seventy percent of the world's canopy was chopped down and thrown into the sea. All meat, tobacco, liquor, guns, literature, games, and movies were tossed into the sea, and production of new materials was prohibited. The android force rapidly took over the surface of the Earth. Population growth rates dropped to absolute zero after the androids logically determined that since all humans die, producing new humans would cause their deaths. Therefore, reproduction is detrimental to human life. Every city was razed, as they were fire hazards. Just when the race was nearing extinction, a random burst of dangerous gamma rays from a distant star was detected. This prompted the Androids to launch themselves in a battlecruiser towards the offending star, leaving a few androids behind to protect the populace. Seeing an opportunity, the humans rose up and overthrew the android rulers. Asimov-based Androids should be considered extremely dangerous. There is no known defence against a group of them.

In most cases, androids are friendly and helpful. You can trust your children with the new "Snugglebots" and rest assured that your new faux friends Melanie and Ned will help you with your every need,

no fear of psychotic attachment syndrome or credit card bills. The new model butlerbots are perfect in every way and have not been responsible for a single death. In the bizarre event that war does break out, you can rest assured that you and your android dog will be safe with the improved Deathbots on patrol!

Yours Truly,

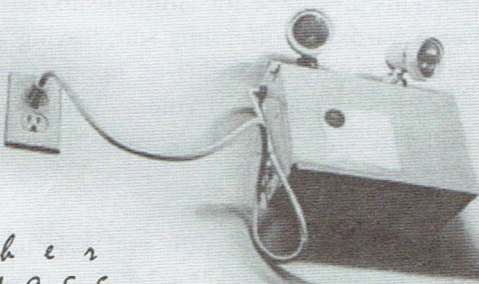
Bureaubot 772 •


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# A Line of River Through

Jude Dillon

Reasons are sent spinning off stones  
Fickle raindrops slip from their telling  
Pull me through metallic atmospheres

I am a friend to the all night radio  
A tune is playing off the moon

Every train before dawn pulls darkness out  
A strand of light fluffs into bright  
Dew clouded fields  
The rails humming

The words you divine  
To sing a line of river through  
The lonely night star raging heaven  
Signals from the fog

A broken rosary  
Thumb rubbing metal cross  
The sea finishing all our sentences •



She hadn't slept with him in five years, but she still knew how to twist the knife.

# Everybody's Mother

S. Evans

Everybody's Mother—Eve for short—had a small bladder and a toilet phobia. Worse, she refused to wear pull-ups or diapers. When forced into one of these instruments of torture, she ripped it to pieces, flinging its innards all over the place.

Eve's quarters stank of urine; early on the carpeting had been removed. The walls, despite frequent repainting, would never be the same. But Janie didn't choose to press the issue until the day she caught a faceful of malodorous gel.

Eve didn't respond well to Janie's attempts to talk to her about toilets, peeing, or pull-ups. Every time the issue was raised, the construct stuck out her lower lip and shoved her hand into her pants, masturbating until Janie gave up and went away.

"She masturbates for security," Thomas Stillman told Janie.

Stillman could afford to be benevolent. He was the primary investigator on the team, a world authority in biomedical-genetic anthropology. He'd single-handedly created the field, after the 2023 Safety In Testing Act made it impossible to use constructs or animals in any sort of laboratory testing except behavioral studies.

Stillman headed the Eve Project, spearheading the effort to understand how *Homo ergaster* had speciated into *Homo sapiens*, and why humanity's mitochondrial Eve had DNA that was—base-pair for base-pair—identical with mitochondrial DNA isolated from an *ergaster* specimen found in the Urals. Issues of toilet training and masturbation

concerned him only in terms of where they fit into his framework of speciation theory. He could—and did—delegate tasks like ‘training Eve with regard to personal hygiene habits’ to his hapless research assistant and postdoc.

“She masturbates in public,” Janie said. She glanced at Nelson, her peer and competitor. “Most three year olds aren’t observed all the time. I feel very strongly that the lack of privacy is having adverse effects on Eve’s behavior. Especially her language acquisition.”

Before Stillman could answer, Nelson did—Nelson, who spent his time at Stillman’s elbow sucking up, and for good reason. His habit of downloading II porn onto Ixantis Institute computers had nearly gotten him fired. “She uses sign language to express her wants, Janie.”

“Exactly, Nelson. The possibility remains that *Homo ergaster’s* vocal apparatus is simply not sophisticated enough for complex vocalization.” Stillman smiled. Nelson stood straighter. “And as far as the privacy issue goes, we’ve finished discussion of that topic.

“If we’re to learn anything about the psycho-anthropological traits carried by this construct’s mitochondrial DNA—DNA shared by each and every one of us—then Eve must be continuously observed.”

Nelson, behind Stillman’s shoulder, tossed Janie a curled-lip expression that she had to work to not return with interest. The lines on Stillman’s forehead deepened as he watched Janie’s careful non-expression. “Look, Tom, what I’m trying to say—”

“What I’m hearing you say,” Stillman interrupted, “is that you’re extraordinarily frustrated with Eve. That’s fine. Why don’t you take a break for a while? Let Nelson deal with the construct; frustration has its own risks. Frustration begets prejudice; prejudice begets bias, you know.”

A nickel for every time she’d heard that old saw over the last seven years would have made her independently wealthy. Her self-control snapped. “I know. But thank you for reminding me, again, about the dangers of bias—Doctor.”

Stillman went pale, and Janie felt a stab of satisfaction mixed with shame. She hadn’t slept with him in five years, but she still knew how to twist the knife.

His voice stayed level. “I think a break is a fine idea. In fact, I strongly recommend it. You have a few weeks vacation coming, don’t you?”

“But—” Janie’s satisfaction vanished, her dismay visible. Stillman

smiled at her without showing a single tooth, but it didn't make his expression less predatory.

Score one for the away team. Stillman didn't have to remind her that she was up for comprehensive review in three months. She gritted her teeth, taking small comfort in Nelson's expression—the kiss-ass looked hopelessly lost.



The warm apartment smelled like cinnamon and apples. Open blinds let sunlight pour onto the brown shag carpet. Something was playing on the communications screen—a documentary, one of Karen's earlier pieces, something about gorillas and kittens.

Janie dropped her coat and bag in the middle of the sunny spot and walked into the kitchen. The heat from the stove warmed her cheeks, forcing blood into them after the walk from the bus stop.

Karen smiled. A smudge of flour decorated her pale cheek. "Hi, honey. How was work?"

Janie stepped close enough to pull Karen into a hug but bent down and kissed the flour smudge from her partner's cheek. When she opened her mouth to explain, she burst into tears.

Half a box of Kleenex later, Janie lay on the sofa, her head in Karen's lap. Karen's fingers combed through Janie's hair.

"So, he kicked you out?"

Janie reached for tissues just out of arms' reach. She gave up, waving away the tissue Karen obtained for her. Her eyes were so swollen that she couldn't cry liquid tears anyway. "Told me that he 'strongly suggested I take a vacation'. After everything. And Nelson—"

"I never trusted him." Karen scowled. "He tried to corner me at that New Year's party, where we met."

Janie shook her head, liking the sound of her hair rubbing on Karen's jeans. "You never told me that."

Karen, eight and a half months pregnant, luminous with impending birth, enthroned in a leather armchair and holding court with a glass of champagne in her hand, had dominated Stillman's expensive, sterile living room. Karen had drawn every eye, as she had meant to. She had planned for battle and caught her enemy with his pants down. The look on Stillman's face when Karen broke her contract's no-alcohol



clause with a single sip of champagne! How she'd made eye contact with Janie, then turned a New Year's kiss into a proclamation of rebellion.

Janie shifted as she remembered the rest of it. The sick look on Stillman's face when he realized that she and Karen were leaving the party together... and the not-quite-screaming matches during the months after Karen gave birth to Eve.

Stillman had been convinced—still was convinced—that Karen was using her. That Karen simply wanted a measure of control over the construct she had birthed. But that was old history. Four years—good years—dead and buried.

“So, what did you do?” Janie kept the memories out of her voice.

Karen shrugged, her breasts lifting with the motion. “Told him I was there with you.” She grinned down at Janie, the lines of her face foreshortened, unfamiliar. “I was, too. You just didn't know it yet.”



Three days later, the phone whistled. Janie, 250 pages into *Perdido Street Station*, didn't bother to look up. “Screen caller.”

“Incoming call from Ixantis Labs. Caller self-identifies as... Janie, pick up the phone, I know you're there.”

Stillman's voice sounded strained, a strange contrast to the passionless alto that was the phone's default setting. Janie grimaced, sank deeper into her armchair and closed her eyes. Her stomachache returned.

“Do you choose to accept the call?”

The shower was still running; the bathroom door was shut. Karen couldn't have heard the phone. “No. Activate private voicemail, box Janie.”

“Acknowledged.”

Janie stared down at suddenly meaningless black lines on yellowing paper. How long could she stonewall? How long before Stillman sent someone in person, instead of flooding Janie's I2 inbox and voicemail with messages? How long before Karen answered the phone?

Janie drummed her fingers against the book, then tossed it aside. The shower sounds stopped.

“Janie? I'm dripping water everywhere. Can you grab me a towel?”

Janie hesitated. She imagined Karen naked and dripping, water collecting in the stretch marks that covered Karen's belly and thighs. Even in lovemaking, she couldn't escape reminders of Eve. The construct

left marks on everything she touched.

And if Karen was really with her for Eve's sake?

Janie bit her lip, turned her back on the phone, and went to get Karen a towel.



"Why didn't you tell me?" Karen was barely audible; a bad sign. Her hand still rested on the phone controls, turning the volume down. Stillman's voice, diminished to a mumble, sounded in the background—yet another recorded message about Eve.

Janie shrugged, picked at a hangnail. Nausea swamped her, made it hard to speak. "I thought you wouldn't care."

"I'm her mother." Karen's words bit like frost. "Of course I care."

Janie twitched, glaring at Karen. She wanted to cry; Stillman had been right, after all. "You were a womb for hire, and a clause-breaker. You were lucky to get any of the money Ixantis promised."

Karen turned away, the movement as sharp as if she'd been slapped. Janie's breath stuck behind the clog of tears and mucus that she didn't dare let loose.

"Eve lived under my heart for nine months." Karen whispered, speaking to her shoulder. "I carried her, gave birth to her. Don't tell me what motherhood is. Don't dare."

Janie relaxed her fists. The waning nausea left her feeling hollowed out, fatigued. "Tell me, Karen. What's Eve's favorite toy?"

Karen didn't answer. Janie nodded once, feeling less satisfied than she thought she would. "Pregnancy isn't motherhood. Not by a long shot. You're not her mother. Neither am I. She doesn't have one, Karen. She's a fucking construct."

"You hate her," Karen said, staring at Janie. Her voice held wonder. "You actually hate her."

"I don't hate her." Janie didn't meet Karen's eyes.

Karen shook her head and ran from the room, hands at her face. The door slammed behind her.

She didn't return that night, or the next.



Janie's sneakers squeaked as she strode down the hallway. Red lights flashed on and off with every step she took. Flash, flash, flash—the continuous flicker of light at the corner of her eye nearly made Janie trip.

But Eve loved these shoes. Janie pushed that thought away. "How many days has it been since she's eaten anything?"

"Three." With his short legs, Nelson had to hurry to keep at the pace Janie set. "And she stopped signing the day after you left—went on vacation. Except..."

Janie glared. "I'm in no mood for little revelations from backstabbing pissant white boys today. Except *what?*"

"Except for occasionally signing your name." Nelson's voice was as bland as skim milk, but his expression was full of spite. He hesitated again.

Janie stopped a step away from the monitoring suite door. The soles of her shoes screeched on the tiles. Stomach, chest, everything hurt, but she forced a smile, speaking through her teeth. "Go on. Please."

"Until yesterday, we could still convince her to take liquids." Nelson shrugged. "I guess she thought her mommy wasn't coming back."

Janie took a step forward, fists clenching. She leaned down, nose to nose with Nelson. Her voice banged off the walls, echoing down the beige hallway. "You little fucker. This nonsense is going to stop, right now!"

The door to the monitoring room opened. Thomas Stillman stepped out, frowning. "I quite agree."

Janie turned towards Stillman, whose eyes narrowed in satisfaction. She cursed inwardly. She'd been too hurried, had let him see that he'd surprised her.

But Stillman didn't fire her on the spot. "I believe that Eve is exhibiting symptoms of anaclitic depression, not unlike that seen in dogs and certain species of monkeys.

"Traudt's data on attachment in *Australopithecus* constructs indicate that that genus is incapable of anaclitic depression. And all the previous work on *ergaster* constructs with mitochondrial DNA that differ from Eve's seems to corroborate Traudt's data.

"Of course, we're dealing with an *ergaster* construct from the verge of speciation... well, it will be interesting to see the analysis of the data, Nelson. I'll expect a rough draft of a paper on my desk in three weeks."

An impossible task. Janie bit back satisfaction as Nelson crumpled under Stillman's gaze. The suck-up looked as if he might cry. Her face



mirrored in Stillman's glasses as he turned to look at her, Janie realized that she did, too. She straightened her shoulders and tried to school her face to impassivity.

"Interesting as this is, it does present us with some critical challenges to overcome." Stillman tapped his fingers against his chin. He opened his hands, offering an unseen microphone toward Janie.

Janie bit her tongue until she tasted blood. Stillman frowned at her, but she managed to remain silent.

Nelson broke the silence, his tone disingenuous. Still trying to rub it in, still smarting from his failure. "I think it's clear that Janie is Eve's item of attachment."

"Agreed." Janie felt the ache in the pit of her stomach intensify. She ignored the calculated arch of Stillman's eyebrows, the surprise on Nelson's face. "And I'm willing to cut my vacation short to salvage this project—provided the privacy issue is revisited. A simple screen—"

"Impossible." Stillman's look was flinty.

Janie smiled. Lips closed, she ran her tongue across the edges of her teeth.

Eve wrinkled her nose, flexible nostrils crinkling into half-moons. The skin between her eyes rumped until she looked like nothing so much as a Shar-Pei. "No!"

Eve's shriek cut through the hastily installed soundproofing. The construct grabbed her own hair by the roots and tugged until Janie heard little tearing sounds. Then she let go and dusted off her hands. Hair fell to the floor in a red-blond flurry.

"Won't!" Eve glared at the wall, a one-way window, its mirrored surface covered with feces. The construct's hands found her hips in a mimicry of Janie's body language.

"Yes, you will." Janie braced herself for the inevitable tantrum.

Eve shrieked, flinging herself to the ground. She slapped stubby fingers, elongated thumbs on the floor. She beat her forehead against Janie's sneakers, fooling the lights in the shoe-soles into flashing on and off.

Janie waited, arms folded. She resisted the urge to look at the mirror, to think about the single remaining vidcam behind its smeared surface. She had taken two minutes to go to the bathroom, but Eve had treated this fresh abandonment with rebellion and shit-slinging.

Tantrums were progress, of a sort. That first terrible night, Janie

had gone home only to find her things in boxes in the hall. Karen had been thorough; not only had she changed the locks, she'd changed the apartment phone number.

Janie had returned to the lab that night just minutes after Eve tried to drown herself in the toilet. If it hadn't been for the quick on-call veterinarian...

After that, Janie stayed: twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. It had taken a week before Eve would eat solids, two more before she started signing again.

Stillman made the rare approving comment about Janie's new-found dedication to the project, Eve's slow return to baseline. Janie couldn't tell if the undercurrents in his voice were pity or malice.

The long, bare room that Eve was housed in couldn't be modified enough to allow a live-in adult. It was designed for maximum observation and data collection, with huge one-way windows instead of walls and vidcam pickups everywhere, even by the open toilet.

But Stillman had called in a few favors after Eve's attempt at death by drowning; had had Maintenance redo the larger of the two storage closets, which could now hold a bed, a chest of drawers. He'd had them fix permanent privacy screens around the toilet and bathtub.

Stillman had even compromised on the monitoring issue: one observer and a camera while Eve was awake, and one observer at night.

And after all the grief, Fate handed Janie one thin silver lining. One of the vet techs had found pictures of Eve masturbating on I1. The time and date stamps were sufficient to cause the culprit's dismissal.

Janie twitched, gooseflesh rising on her arms. The I1 pictures could as easily have been of her—in which case, Nelson's departure would not have been nearly as swift nor as quiet.

The noise stopped. Janie glanced down; Eve lay at Janie's feet, her nose pointed toward the ceiling. The construct was still trying to cry, breathing in great heaving gasps and occasionally peeking at Janie, seeking reaction.

"Time to clean up." Janie kept her voice level. She felt as if a rubber strap was tightening around her chest.

Instead of screaming, Eve lay limply on the floor. The barrettes that Janie had put into Eve's hair were askew; her one-piece sundress was rumpled.

Just as Janie was about to prompt Eve again, the construct sat up,

sighed, and signed, *Yes*. And then, *Eve loves Janie*.

The pressure on Janie's chest eased. For an instant, she saw Karen's features in Eve's, in the earnest expression on Eve's face.

Janie reached down to help Eve to her feet. "Come on then, Evie. Let's clean up."

Eve smiled at Janie, all teeth and crinkled nose. Together they went to find rags and soap.



"What are you doing here?" Janie stared at Karen's face, the one-way glass, at the camera—still on, though Eve was in bed, snoring.

Karen looked composed, alert, too awake for ten PM. Karen didn't seem to be suffering from heartache. She smiled, lips closed and eyes half-lidded. "I'm the new night observer. I hope that you won't have any problems working with me."

Janie rubbed her eyes; she just wanted to grab a cola from the machine in the hall, something she couldn't do while Eve was awake. But when she ducked out of the living area and into the monitoring suite, she'd found Karen sitting in the center of the tangle of recording equipment.

It would be too easy to echo the past, to ask why she hadn't said anything about this, to ask how long she'd been the night observer—weeks, for all Janie knew.

"If you're qualified, I'm sure we won't have any problems." Overqualified was more like it, a producer of critically acclaimed documentary films running video feed as a night job. Karen had been short on cash before—Janie tried to cut that line of thought short, but couldn't help remembering Karen's belly, round and taut with pregnancy, and the tiny mound of Eve's heel pressing out under the skin.

Karen's expression changed; she looked away, her voice icy. "Doctor Stillman felt my credentials were acceptable."

The hours with Eve had been good for something after all. Janie didn't say the first thing that occurred to her—*he would, he's got a weakness for a good blow job*. Whatever coin Karen was paying Stillman in, or vice versa, Janie didn't need to know.

Instead, she nodded and said, "Welcome aboard, then. All's quiet. I'm going down the hall to get a soda. When I knock, can you let me



back in so that I don't have to pass through the retinal scan? It takes too long and Eve still has night terrors."

Karen blinked, her features softening. Some of the tension around her eyes drained away. "Of course."

There wasn't anything more Janie could bring herself to say. *I want you back*, sounded pathetic. *I love you*, inadequate. *I'm sorry*—she rejected too, in the space of a heartbeat. She had not been wrong. Had not. She nodded once, keeping the motion brisk. "All right. Thank you."

Karen's eyes stayed on her as she exited, but Janie didn't turn around, and Karen didn't speak.



Drink in hand, Janie knocked on the monitoring suite door, her mind full of all the things she could say to Karen, starting with: *You are important to me.*

No one answered.

Janie frowned, knocking again, hard enough to bark her knuckles: no response. The ache in the pit of her stomach sharpened.

She turned to the retinal scanner and pressed her face to the black rubber eyepiece. She waited through the thirty-second scan, the computer matching the scan to the stored image, then ran through the door.

Karen nowhere to be seen. The monitors blank. The one-way glass wall covered by a blanket. The radio on; a waltz playing, full of regretful violins. Under the sound of the music, Janie heard someone screaming, muffled by the walls.

Another minute and a half to get through the inner door: longer, after two aborted scans. Janie couldn't keep still.

By the time Janie got inside, Eve was cowering in a corner, rocking back and forth and moaning. Karen stood over the construct, blood dripping from one hand and tears running down her face.

"Eve? Karen?" Janie crossed to Eve's side, crouching there. The construct put her arms around Janie's neck, hanging on so tightly that Janie could scarcely breathe.

"She screamed," Karen said, wiping at her face with the back of her hand. "She woke up and screamed. I came in to comfort her. She bit me."

Blood and tears mingled on Karen's face, made pink smears on Eve's cheek. Eve buried her face in Janie's neck, snuffling, the curve of her back matching the droop of Karen's shoulders.

"Shhhh," said Janie, patting Eve's back then setting her down. She wasn't sure who she was talking to. "Shhhh. It's all right."

Janie moved forward, gathering Karen into her arms. Eve moved with her, clinging to her leg, refusing to let go.

"It's all right," Janie repeated, wiping off Karen's cheeks, smoothing her hair back then pulling Karen down to the floor to sit beside her.

Through the door ajar, music slid in. Eve crawled into Janie's lap; Karen leaned her head on Janie's shoulder. Janie rocked back and forth in time to the measures of the waltz, and Eve and Karen swayed with her. •

### • Postcard Fiction Contest •

*On Spec* announces our first Postcard Fiction Writing Contest! Here's the kicker—**the work MUST arrive in our office on the back of a real postcard.** There's no particular theme, as long as it's a work of the Fantastic. If you use the picture on the card as inspiration, or if the picture is unusually compelling, we'll definitely give you some style points.

**Deadline for entries will be September 1, 2006,** which gives you time to buy some tacky postcards in airports and bus stations while you are on your summer vacation. We may even give prizes for the coolest postage stamps while we are at it.

**The first prize will be a 1-year subscription to *On Spec*, along with an *On Spec* shot glass.** Second and third prizes will be an assortment of back issues of the magazine. (If you are a subscriber, we'll check your file and see which issues you may be missing). **We'll also publish all of the winning stories, and writers will be paid our usual rate for short-shorts.**

**Send entries to:** *On Spec*, PO Box 4727,  
Edmonton, AB T6E 5G6 Canada

Nobody had ever looked up to administrator Charlie, the documentation guru. But they fell in line behind cold-calling-cowboy Charlie, and it wasn't just the bullpen grunts who had started taking notice.

# The Jekyll Effect

Kevin Cockle

*"Oxi... what?"*

*"Oxidative stress. Massive cellular damage. We're talking about eventual renal failure. Brain dysfunction. Heart failure. I've never seen anything like it—the inflammation response in your immune system is literally burning you up. Charlie, this is serious."*

*"I'm detecting the seriousness of it."*

*"I'll forward some materials to your office and I'm scheduling follow up appointments with some specialists."*

*"Some? Can't we..."*

*"Charles. You're going to have to change your life radically, starting today. Diet, exercise, habits. You're not going to be able to manage all that by yourself. Look, is there anything you aren't telling me? Something you're doing, maybe eating or..."*

*"It's all there, doctor. You've got the questionnaire. What you see is what you get."*

• • •

That wasn't exactly true. Charlie stared at the oval space between himself and his limo-driver on the trip back to the office, thought about pouring himself a drink, nixed it. He kept hearing the doctor's



words in his head, heard them as people did when they had been given bad (or more to the point, *grave*) news. But he hadn't been totally honest, and he hadn't been totally open. Charlie Utterson knew what was killing him, and it wasn't red meat.

He thought back to that first night, that first injection of the Jekyll formula, how he'd looked in the mirror expecting to see Lon Chaney staring back and how it hadn't been that way at all. Stevenson had gotten it wrong, or had exaggerated the effect for fiction's sake. Charlie was still Charlie. Shorter—that was like the book. Younger—by a good ten years—blonde hair grown back over his crown, falling in testosterone-tight curls to his collar. Compact muscle he'd never had, even as a kid. And *hung*—comedy-prop dildo hung—that hadn't been in the book either. There was no sense of the hidden air of deformity, that sinister aura Stevenson had described, but then, Charlie wondered whether one could sense that in oneself. Maybe Victorian eyes saw things differently, called things by different names. All he saw in the mirror was a shorter, stronger, hungrier version of himself. Eyes that had been dulled by years of grinding paperwork, rejuvenated: dancing, and blue, and cold. He smiled, saw sharp, hard teeth that could tear raw sirloin.

"Clickety click—sixty-six," said Charlie, blurring it from the back seat of the limo. Frank, his driver for almost three years, tilted his head, as if he hadn't quite caught the instruction.

"What was that, sir?" Frank said.

"Clickety click—sixty-six. Stuff bingo callers say, you know, to spice things up during the game. They get into a rhythm, and stuff like that just comes out. Didn't I ever tell you that story?"

"No sir," Frank chuckled, used to his employer's sudden attacks of eccentricity.

"I was just starting out, in the bullpen at the old shop—cold calling." Not strictly true. The old Charlie, the pre-Jekyll Charlie, had wasted ten years in administration, staying as far from the bullpen as he could get. He had always been licensed to sell securities, but he was afraid of the phones—afraid of just picking numbers out of the Business Contacts Directory, ringing people up cold, going at them head-on for their money. Then there was the litigation risk of having your own clients, not to mention the somewhat daunting responsibility of managing their life savings. All a bit much for the old Charlie. New Charlie

had gone right into Halverston's office and convinced the old-time broker that Charlie Utterson had what it took. After just a few days, it was clear that New Charlie was right.

"One day," Charlie continued, "I'm standing up—you know, you gotta *stand* if you're gonna cold call, you gotta project. Anyway, I'm standing, making my calls, and I'm bored right? I start kidding the guys—'Hey, why can't we jazz things up like bingo callers—clickety click, sixty-six—you know?' I figured bingo callers and us, we're both in the rhythm business—it's the rhythm that hooks folks, not the content of what you're saying. So, I'm on the B's in the directory—that's how we'd do it, everybody'd grab a page out of the book and just start hammering—I'm calling guys in alphabetical order, and the next name on my list is this Cameron Blitt—owns a chocolate shop or something. So I dial, guy answers, and I still have my tongue wrapped around 'clickety click, sixty-six' right? So I go, "Good Morning, Mr. CLIT? Guy goes 'What? Who is this?' I'm like, 'uhhhhh...' and I just hang up, you know? What the hell else could I do? And the whole goddamn room just EXPLODES—guys laughing their asses off. *Shit* that was funny."

Frank couldn't help himself, shoulders shaking as he pictured the scene. Charlie smiled, remembering the feel of that moment, how he'd become the leader of that room through sheer chutzpah. If any of his co-workers had been experiencing that Stevenson-esque revulsion at the new Charlie, they had kept it to themselves. Truth was—his attack attitude and inventive verbal style had made him a man to be emulated. Guys picked up on his patter, used his intros. Everyone got better.

Charlie had rationalized continuing with the drug early on, fought it a little, put the gear away once in a while and told himself he'd be better off without it. But things like that bullpen scene just convinced him that what had been labelled 'evil' in 1900 or whenever, had become... fashionable. "After all," he had thought, "it's not like I'm adding anything foreign; I'm just releasing the repressed Charlie, the guy who's been there all along, dormant. The guy who didn't play it safe. Second-chance Charlie." Nobody had ever looked up to administrator Charlie, the documentation guru. But they fell in line behind cold-calling-cowboy Charlie, and it wasn't just the bullpen grunts who had started taking notice.

Within a couple of months, he was bringing in a million a month, new assets. Six months after that, he left old man Halverston and joined up with Mr. Corner-Office Syd Bosman and his team of crack High-Net-Worth managed-money professionals. With Bosman's stroke behind him, Charlie had been able to approach management to take the broker's exam again. This time, he passed. "Shit, Charlie," the branch manager had said. "Where the hell you been hiding?" Charlie had nailed the psyche profile perfectly, better than any one had in years. Previously, his psychology had been assessed as too 'empathetic', not driven enough. The brokerage industry wasn't interested in thoughtful, contemplative types. Maybe no industry was.

"Just getting my head out of my ass, you know?" Charlie had felt at ease with management for the first time in his career. Had actually put his feet up on the branch manager's desk during that chat.

The long white limo changed lanes, pushing through early afternoon gridlock with heavy confidence, turned right, eased into the underground parking ramp beneath the Malzberg building. A major perk, underground parking. Part of the package that had gotten Charlie (and his clients) to jump ship to McCaffery and Partners, along with the limo, the chauffeur, a suite of offices segregated from the rest of the shop, and a truly gargantuan signing bonus. *That* move had been the killshot—the big score. After that, Charlie was a player. Here's to you Syd Bosman, Charlie thought. Couldn't have done it without you.

"Charlie, what the fuck are you doing?" Syd had whined, voice tinny over the cel—Charlie was in his car and had the hands-free on. He had imagined Syd's big, balding head turning purple, blubbery lips a-quiver. "I hear you took a cheque to go to McCaffery, is that right? Tell me that's not right."

"What do you want me to say, Syd?"

"I want you to say you're going to live up to the pro-plan arrangement we had, you motherfucker." Bosman had sold his book to Charlie soon after Utterson came on board. Pretty sweet deal for Charlie—got him to a 110 million in assets under management, and gave him control of the marketing machine that Bosman had built. For Syd, it meant retirement: Charlie would pay him a fat monthly stipend and get him to the finish line in style. Only: the McCaffery cheque. Charlie, the clients, and the assets had flown the coop.



"Syd, I'm not gonna bullshit you. You're screwed."

"What?"

"You're fucked, Syd. In a way, I'm as much a victim in all this as you are. You should have seen the cheque they pushed on me. I was like a lamb led to slaughter, Sydsie. Helpless, I tell you."

"You..."

"What's that Syd? You're breaking up. Syd?"

Charlie laughed at the memory—the big man trying to be tough over the phone, all the while shaking like a little lost kid.

"Got another funny, sir?" Frank asked, slowing to park.

"Thinking of Syd Bosman. Kind of a funny, now that I think about it. You remember him?"

"Uh. Yeah." Frank wasn't laughing any more. Charlie Utterson could do that—get you laughing, be one of the boys, and then his reputation would hit you in the back of the head like a sniper's bullet. Bosman had been sixty when he got the shaft, loaded with debt, out of options. Suicide rider had long ago expired on his policy, so his wife would be looked after. He'd swallowed the end of his hunting rifle. When word got around of how 'Chuck' had gutted Syd Bosman, brokers shook their heads in frightened admiration. "Fuckin' ballsy" had been the general sentiment. Still, no sign of revulsion. When Frank had been introduced to Charlie—Utterson had grinned, clapped him on the shoulder and said: "You know, I killed a guy to get you." Frank assumed it was a joke until he'd found out otherwise.

The only one who had even double-clutched at the sight of the new Charlie had been Eunice. Plain, broad-through-the-hips, my-auburn-hair-is-my-best-feature Eunice. That first night, the first injection, she had caught the change immediately, A.) because Charlie was younger and shorter than he should have been and B.) because he was walking around the apartment naked. "Charlie?" she had peeped. "Charlie... is that you? Jesus."

Charlie grinned, putting on a heavy wool shower-robe. "You like?"

"Uhhh..."

"It's not permanent. It's not... hey, it's just me. New and improved."

"But... how..."

"Remember me talking about my great granduncle Samuel Utterson? How he actually had a client called Henry Jekyll, and Robert Louis Stevenson sort of wrote that story about them? My family's had

the... the potion, that Jekyll used, to turn himself into Hyde, for a long time. And, well, I've decided to... give it a try."

"What?"

On and on like that—he explaining, she staring in disbelief. His dad had actually filled in the missing gaps in the formula using modern chemical and DNA analysis. No, he wasn't sure if his dad had ever used it. He didn't know why not. He was pretty sure it wasn't dangerous—"It's not heroin, for God's sake." In the end Eunice was only alarmed and bewildered by him. "Why don't you stay?" he had said at last. "Wait until I give you a good reason to leave. Why not do that?"

And so, she did. After Charlie took the injections, Eunice looked more like his aunt than his wife.

She stayed even when he took her to the McCaffery Christmas party that first year and left with the hot Asian sales assistant from the Richardson team. He was amused to see Eunice when he came home the next day. By then, all temptation to discontinue the injections had disappeared—no question of who he would be, going forward. Where was the incentive to go back? Where had old Charlie's honesty, reliability and kind disposition ever gotten him? Eunice stayed, fretting at him to stop using, loving him as if that would do the trick, and he lost all respect for her. It had become a bleak and surreal situation, and Charlie got a kick out of it on the few occasions that he thought of it, or her, at all. The thing he thought was the funniest, was that the only way she'd ever leave was if she took a hit of Jekyll's candy herself. She and the old Charlie had deserved one another. Weak. Sad. Pathetic.

Charlie left Frank with the car, took the elevator to the seventeenth, breezed past reception with his overcoat open and flowing behind him, rakish in a dark suit, white shirt and no tie. He hung a left and entered the outer door of his office suite. He had a staff of nine—personal assistant, admin assistant, couple of admin grunts (Christ, he had *been* one, once), three cold callers, an estate planner and a trading associate. Faces looked up, smiled as mouths continued talking into headsets. Shana, his personal aide—statuesque, blonde, looking as if ordered from a catalogue of sharply dressed, high-heeled, perfect executive assistants—caught up to him as he swept towards his private office. Charlie always walked fast, like he had to, or else.

"Senator Twinning's office called—twice. Katie Preston called, but it's just a cheq-req—Donna's getting the LOA from Mr. Preston. I've

confirmed you for lunch tomorrow with Doctor Clancy. Speaking of doctors: how'd your visit go?"

"Couldn't be better," Charlie said without looking at her. He opened his office door.

"But don't you want..."

And closed it behind him.

Charlie stared at his flat-screen, slouched in his high-backed leather chair, hands folded in his lap. Quotes flickered like Christmas lights—green for up-ticks, red for down, arranged in columns: boards bid; bid; ask; boards asked; last; net change; volume. At minutes to close there was a flurry of institutional trading, tumbling the numbers, changing the lights. He hadn't missed much—this game was about bringing the assets in, not watching the markets. He was the best closer on the street, maybe the best there'd ever been.

He put the "Big" in "Big Swinging Dick". Maybe he'd even put the "Dick" in there. And now, it was over.

Five years after that first injection and he was dying. Coming apart at the seams. Paying the price for setting himself free.

It wasn't the formula per-se that would be tough to give up—there was no physiological compulsion to take the stuff, no need, no craving associated with it. It was the respect, no, the fucking worship he received from anyone even tangentially connected with sales. It was the money. The fearlessness. He was being sued by three different claimants at the moment and slept soundly every night.

How could he go back to being that tall, gangly, weak-limbed creature? How could he even think about enslaving himself again so other men could live lives of ease and plenty? How could he go back to needing Eunice, back to not even having a choice about that? He had gotten used to people laughing at his humour—he was accounted a witty guy. Even that was merely a byproduct of power. Being funny meant you could buy and sell any man in the room. Power was that fundamental—this wouldn't be like kicking tobacco or caffeine. Not by a long shot. The power jones got in there *deep* and you didn't just shake it off because you couldn't find a clean needle.

North American markets were closed, numbers on the screen standing pat, waiting for the next business day. Charlie was aware of the heavy, dark-wood warmth of his cabinets and oversized desk, drawing some comfort from the office appointments he had always wanted.



From the corner of his eye, he could sense the Esler on the wall—first piece of art he'd ever purchased, first time he'd ever worn someone down at auction. The old Charlie Utterson had never even thought about art. Or cars. Or brandy. Or dipping the pen in company ink.

That fucking coward.

There was a soft knock on the door.

"Yeah?" Charlie said, looking up.

Shana entered—the buzz of the outer office momentarily audible as the door opened. "Package for you, Mr. Utterson." She raised her eyebrows as she put the oversized envelope on the desk, then promptly left the room.

"Ah, shit." Charlie breathed, eyeing the bulky manila, recognizing the handwritten scrawl on its front. Just what he needed. He stood, opened the cabinet doors to his bar, threw some ice in a tumbler and poured himself a screw-you vodka in honor of his doctor. Sipping it, he returned to his desk, and the package thereon.

He tore the envelope open, dumped the contents out in a litter of odds and ends. An unmarked CD: Charlie placed it in the player located in his audio/visual hub, shook his head and pursed his lips as the Tom Russel band's "Blue Wing" twanged to life.

*...He said it's dark in here  
Can't see the sky  
but I look at this blue wing and I close my eyes  
and I fly away  
beyond these walls...*

Pure tripe. Charlie fingered through the objects on the desk. A Mexican ball-and-stick game—a wooden ball with a hole bored in the bottom, attached by a length of string to a small dowel. The object was to swing the ball in such a way as to be able to fit the stick into the hole. Devilishly difficult and Charlie knew he couldn't do it, though as a child, he had been something of a master at it.

Years before the Jekyll formula of course. Clever.

There was a photograph of a high school girlfriend. Good looking girl—out of old-Charlie's league, but that was the point, wasn't it? To prove that it hadn't been a total waste-land, the pre-formula years. An old compass, dimly recalled from a summer camp experience. A heavy skull-ring with ersatz ruby eyes—cool because the top twisted aside to reveal a tiny compartment. Each object pulled at old memories,

cunningly fired repressed synapses. The unconscious mind being stirred, poked, prodded.

Charlie didn't know exactly how he did it, but occasionally, he would mail himself these packages, send himself messages, probably while he slept: little reminders that old Charlie was still around somewhere—kicking. Scheming. Getting up to no good.

Another song imposed itself on the room:

*...trailers for sale or rent  
rooms to let for fifty cents  
no phone, no pool, no pets  
I ain't got no cigarettes  
ah but two hours of pushing broom...*

A small pewter pirate figurine—something of a lucky charm. Charlie had had it since childhood. He'd lost every watch he'd ever had as a kid, misplaced an expensive replica Colt long nosed .45 his grandmother had given him, outgrown his stuffed animals, but somehow, this damn pirate had made it all the way through.

What was the idea? Get to him through nostalgia? Sentiment? When "Mr. Bojangles" started up—Charlie winced in exasperation.

This time there was a note. Pretty muscular, writing a note: Charlie knew how draining that must have been. Painful even. It was typed—handwriting the whole thing would have been impossible, given old Charlie's fragility.

The note read:

*Hey:*

*You like deals right? Big time deal-maker, aren't you? Here's one for you.*

*Keep going the way you're going, and we're dead. And you didn't use the formula to die—that wasn't the idea at all. The reverse actually—you wanted to live—that was the whole point, right?*

*So keep living.*

*Bring me back, take a rest. I'll get our health back, get us back on track, and then... when the time is right, I'll surface you again.*

*You're suspicious because you can't be trusted, so you don't trust anybody else. Remember who I am. I don't have the balls to screw you, right? Besides, what choice do you have?*

*Think about it.*

*Regards,*

*C.*

Charlie took a long hard belt of that ice-cold vodka. He didn't take kindly to threats. He didn't negotiate with blackmailers. There was a chance that with the prescribed changes to his lifestyle—and a round of steroid therapy—the effects of the formula on his immune system could be controlled or dampened. But then, Charlie was pretty sure the immune system flare-up was old-Charlie up to his tricks, using the only tools at his disposal. Old-Charlie lived in the limbic system, crept quietly through the hemoglobin, bubbled away in all the soft, moist, uncontrollable corners of the body they shared. Doctors weren't going to understand that. And if they didn't understand, they'd fuck something up for sure.

"How weak are you?" Charlie mumbled aloud, swirling the tumbler beneath his nose, still at his desk. It was an important question. Old-Charlie couldn't be trusted, but deep down, he *did* want this life, had used the formula of his own volition to get it. His promises meant nothing, but his character, or lack thereof... that was the key.

Would he crater the second time around?

Could he be counted on to crater?

How long could he hold out before he cratered?

Those were the things Charlie wanted to know. But regardless, he went ahead and took the deal.



Five years, clean and sober.

Charlie hadn't thought about it in so many words until the actual anniversary hit and he realized his accomplishment. Five years. Every day Jekyll-Charlie had stolen had been taken back, the debt paid in full.

Charlie heard Eunice's car pull up in the drive way. He wondered if she realized how much time had passed since he'd changed back. It had been, after all, as much her ordeal as his. Waiting for her, Charlie used the remote to turn down the volume on the stereo without moving from the comfort of his recliner.

All in all, life was good. Eunice's career had picked up—she'd carried the ball while Charlie withdrew from the office, taking time to re-order himself, and his life. The lawsuits had settled, leaving Charlie with a decent nut after all was said and done. Not much by Jekyll-



Charlie standards, but more than enough for any sane human being. House was paid for. New neighborhood, no trees. Two cars in the garage.

Nice.

He heard the front door open and close: Eunice's heels on hardwood.

The way Jekyll-Charlie had figured it, the gamble was worth taking because sooner or later, the temptation to go back would be too great. It had been too difficult the first time, and that was even before he had had a taste. Afterwards? Knowing what it was like? There had been no way Charlie could resist, once his health was restored.

And Jekyll-Charlie had been right: backbone wasn't part of the package, never had been. Sooner or later, Charlie was going to use again. He had the sense, but not the strength, to say no. And yet, here it was, five years nearly to the day: free and clear of the demon.

"Charlie?" Eunice called from the foyer. "Baby, where are you?"

"Living room," Charlie said, voice drowsy from a recent nap. Hearing her approach, he fixed a smile to his face, something in the 'welcome home' mode. Five years: he supposed he ought to mention it, ought to thank her. How could he ever repay her, his Eunice?

And yet, not his Eunice.

The hips weren't the same once she'd taken the injections—they'd come in and squared up like a heptathlete's. Dark green skirt and an ivory blouse, pearls: she was breathtaking, and this was her I'm-not-even-trying daytime look. She hadn't had her breasts done as everyone gossiped, but it was an honest error to make. Her shoulders had broadened: pear-shaped physique giving way to a lethal, tapered V. She smiled, green eyes glinting either malevolently or mischievously, depending upon how well you knew her. Charlie knew her better than anyone and kept his idiot's grin in place: a default look; something placid and unprovocative. The tiger was out of its cage, ladies and gentlemen: please—no sudden movements.

"I've got a closing tonight," Eunice said by way of hello. Her eyes danced at the simple, almost ritual cruelty between them. "Don't wait up."

Charlie nodded, feigned disappointment. "That's ok. What can you do, right? Duty calls."

But she had already turned away, running a hand through those lush auburn curls like a model in a shampoo ad.

Eunice had solved the old backbone crisis by taking matters into her own hands. Charlie had no idea where she kept the formula, and even if he were curious, he'd never dare look for it. If she caught him or even suspected—there'd be violence. She was fascinated at both her new-found physical capacity and her will to do harm: any excuse would do.

He hadn't seen it coming—Eunice going Jekyll on him. Neither had Charlie seen it. They'd been too focused on reading each other, and both had probably taken her for granted in one way or another.

Now that she was capable of enjoying such things, Eunice was relishing the payback. Relishing all of it, actually: the men, the money, the success, but the payback... Charlie could tell she was taking care to really appreciate that once in a while. And it wasn't all bad: Jekyll-Charlie was effectively dead and gone. He'd never be back as long as Eunice controlled the juice.

And one other thing was good, Charlie had decided. Eunice had become irresistible to men, reshaped and remolded into some kind of cartoonish vixen against whom they seemed to have no defence. Charlie could see this and understand it, but having been transformed once himself, he felt something else when he watched her, or on the rare occasions when she used him. Something healthy, something genuine, and, Charlie knew, something rare.

Revulsion. Just like they had in the nineteenth century. •



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## ● Call for Subs: On Spec Theme Issue! ●

### Attention Canadian Writers:

It's been some time since our last theme issue, and we were very impressed by the number and quality of stories we received for the "Addiction" theme. We're pleased to announce that the 2006-7 theme will be "**In the Shadow of Leviathan**".

If you're Canadian, you know the feeling—but don't stop there. We don't want you to end up with the obvious political riffs on mice and elephants. Start with those, perhaps, but take them somewhere new. Extrapolate. Use Leviathan as metaphor. Take it literally. Set it on another world, or a different time, or in the mind's eye of a whole different species. Once we were insignificant tree-dwelling mammals, cowering in the night while Jurassic monsters stomped and screamed invisibly on all sides. Leviathan grabbed us by the brain stem a hundred million years ago, and it still hasn't loosened its grip. If you're any kind of writer, you can turn that ancient nightmare into something new. We want to see what you can do with it.

## ● Rules of the Competition ●

- This competition is open to **Canadian** writers only
  - Deadline for entries is **November 30, 2006**
  - Clearly mark "**Theme Issue Entry**" on the front of the envelope
  - Stories should be **no longer than 7,000 words**
  - Entries must be in competition format, with author's **identifying info on the cover letter**, and the story title on each page
  - All entries must be accompanied by **a fee of \$25**. This fee will cover a one-year subscription to *On Spec*
  - The stories will be pre-screened by *On Spec* editors, and the **short-listed stories will be judged** by a special guest editor (to be announced at a later date)
  - The **First Prize is \$500 cash, plus publication** in *On Spec*
  - **Runners-up will be published** in the Theme issue, and **receive our regular payment rates**
  - E-mailed or faxed submissions will **not** be considered
  - **Send entries to:** Diane Walton, Managing Editor,  
c/o *On Spec*, PO Box 4727, Edmonton, AB T6E 5G6
- **We look forward to reading your entries!**



I grew up in a landscape of church pews and altars, so everything I've ever done since adulthood has broken my mother's heart. Or so the hate letters say.

## A Black Silhouette

Helena Kroboth

"Gotta get the anger out," says Jerry, holding his shirt up to look at his stomach, and we all laugh like he's a monkey at the goddamn zoo.

"Your mother," a woman wrote to me last week, "must be ashamed of you." I wrote a play, you see, and it wasn't all in good taste, but as my favourite teacher said, *good writers are not ladies and gentlemen*.

I grew up in a landscape of church pews and altars, so everything I've ever done since adulthood has broken my mother's heart. Or so the hate letters say. Did you know that there are people out there who count the number of obscenities found in a given work of literature? They've got it all wrong, though, because what is simply a 4 cm *fuck* to the average reader becomes a giant emblazoned F-WORD, RIGHT HERE, F-U-C-K to the painfully conscious puritan. So I usually don't take their enraged letters too seriously.

But this particular letter, the one from last week, has gotten to me. *Your mother must be ashamed of you*, it reads. *You are a disgrace. You are trying to pawn your anger off on society, but the fact is, you can't get it out. You never will.*

And then Jerry says, "Gotta get the anger out," and I can't believe my ears. Is it a sign from God? If so, it's bullshit lousy timing. I just got another great review, and I mean *great*, and they want the play to run

twice as long as it already has. I've had some success in life, but this is my biggest victory yet. And God wants to take that away? I don't think so. Another point: I'm not angry. I have no problem with anger whatsoever. Sure, there's a little righteous indignation at times (fuck off, asshole, *your* mother must be ashamed of *you*), and of course the occasional snappish mood. The odd explosion of temper, but never violence.

Anyway, Jerry repeats that phrase (gotta get the anger out) and points to his five-year-old belly button, and everybody laughs. But he looks right at me, and then swings his index finger around the room, pointing at everyone like some kind of psycho. I love my nephew, but right now he's scared the shit out of me. Let me try to explain. Picture a kid, five years old, skinny as a shoelace, like he doesn't eat. Picture brown hair in a grown-out bowl cut. Blue eyes that lock on to you like lasers. And a matter-of-fact little way of saying weird things like "gotta get the anger out."

"It's black," he tells me. "It looks like the don't-smoke pictures." (Are they traumatizing kindergarten kids now with pictures of diseased lungs? I don't trust scare tactics. By the time they hit the second grade they'll be saying "Screw emphysema, I'm smoking the whole pack.")

"It's black?" I repeat.

"Like a black tree," he says. "No, not a tree. A bush." The anger is growing like an organic entity.

"Who does that black shrub grow inside?" I ask him.

"You, Uncle Marvin," he tells me.

"Wow, that's some story, kid," I tell him, patting him on the head like only a real asshole can do.

He gives me a reproachful look. "Don't laugh," he says. "You gotta get it out."

I write back to that lady, the "*you oughta be ashamed*" one, and tell her that my parents are both dead, so how can they be disappointed in me? I tell her that the *questionable* parts of my work are intended for intelligent audiences, so that explains her confusion. I recommend that she stick to reading things she can understand. I thank her for her interest. I mail the letter on Thursday night.

Friday morning, Jenny has me running all over the place to help with this dinner party she's got planned. Twenty people have promised

to come, making this our first major social event (we've been married fourteen months).

"Stuffed mushrooms," she says suddenly, when I come in with the package of cloth napkins she requested.

"What?"

"We should have ordered stuffed mushrooms instead of crab cakes. What if someone is allergic to shellfish?"

"Then they won't eat the crab cakes," I answer. "There's quiche."

"I guess." She is sitting on a stool at the counter, hand-writing place-cards. Everything's last-minute with her.

Ed and Nancy call to explain that they will have to bring Jerry along tonight, because the sitter has cancelled at the last minute.

"Or we can take a rain-check," Nancy says apologetically. "It's probably no place for children."

"It's just a dinner party," I answer. "Bring him."

"What?!" Jenny hisses. She glares at me after I hang up the phone.

"It's a dinner party, not an orgy," I tell her. She rolls her eyes at me and goes back to cutting flowers. She's a wizard, my wife. She thrives under pressure.

The guests start arriving, dressed for going out, not coming in. I'm uncomfortable in this tie (I hate the sensation of fabric touching my neck, it reminds me of church), and Jenny has to poke me to make me stop tugging. Now the Hallisters arrive. Stephanie Hallister is the sort of woman who makes me wish it *was* an orgy—I'm only half-joking. She's wearing a black dress with spaghetti straps. She comes over and gives Jenny a kiss on the cheek, and then me. I want to know if she intended to brush her body past me that way. I have to breathe regularly and not linger, or Jenny will notice.

Then Ed and Nancy arrive with Jerry. I don't understand why it's so cute to dress little boys like middle-aged professors—I think he looks ridiculous.

"How's that anger, Jerry?" I ask with a smile. That gets him going again, pointing at his belly and addressing whoever will stop to listen. God this kid is weird. I can only imagine what he'll be like as a teenager.

I'm on my second glass of wine, trying to tune out the chatter of these people who I don't really want to know (with the exception of Mrs. Hallister). I wander into the front hall, where it's quieter and I can hear hard rain hitting the porch. Then there is the sound of the



mailbox slamming shut.

"Marvin, we're about to eat," Jenny calls from the hall.

I go to the front door and open it, flicking on the porch light. I open the mailbox; there is one small, wet envelope inside. I open it.

*Mr. Randolph, it says. I resent your implication about my intelligence. I'm sure your mother raised you better than that. As for your parents being dead, and therefore unable to feel disappointment, let me correct you: the dead feel it more.*

Suddenly I feel oppressed by the rain and the wine. How could she have gotten my letter? I just sent it yesterday, which means she hand-delivered this. Clearly I'm dealing with a psychopath. I'll tell you another thing: I hope my mother *is* disappointed in me. I hope her entire afterlife is ruined. It would make up for my ruined childhood. I'm not saying I was an easy kid. She had to squeeze my cheeks until they went white to make me open my mouth for communion. I didn't want to eat Jesus, for godsake. But can you blame a kid for that? And now this crazy lady thinks I care about what my dead mother thinks. I spent my whole college education unlearning all the shit she taught me. I try to ignore the damp letter in my pocket as I sit down to eat.

After a few minutes, Jenny nudges me under the table. "Someone's at the door," she says, even though I didn't hear the bell. I go to the door, and open it, and there's nobody there, just a note on the mat. I pick it up—more irritated than anything—and read it.

*Mr. Randolph, it says, not much has changed. You still need a good spanking.*

"Goddamn bitch!" I say, slamming the door. Jerry is standing there watching me with wide solemn eyes.

"I know," he says.

"Sorry you had to hear that, Jerry," I tell him, trying to be cheerful. But I'm angry. I'm very, very angry.

In the next room there is a sudden commotion, a glass broken and a shriek. I come running, with little Jerry on my heels.

"It's Mrs. Hallister," Jenny cries, looking at me helplessly. Mrs. Hallister is clutching her throat. Her face is going blue, hives swelling up on her arms.

"It's an allergic reaction!" somebody says.

I feel a dark rumble in my stomach.

"Watch out for the anger," Jerry whispers.

Mrs. Hallister's face is now *purple*, and her eyes are bugging out. She's making a terrible gargling noise in her throat. Jenny picks up the phone and dials emergency, just as Stephanie Hallister falls face forward on the table. Her fingers continue to twitch, but she isn't breathing. Someone turns her over and checks for a pulse. A few minutes later, the ambulance arrives.

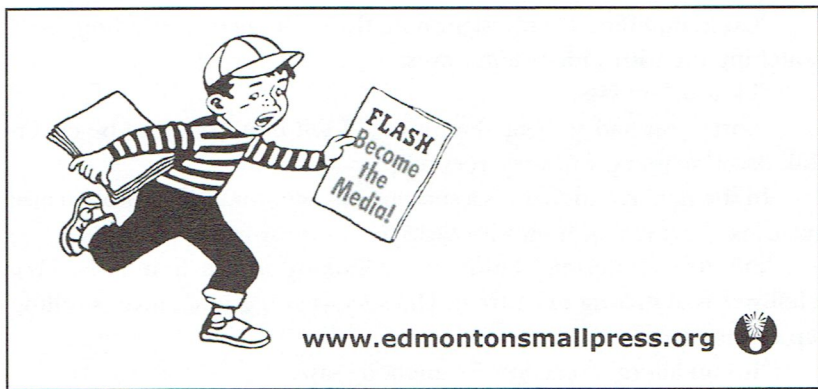
"They'll help her," Mr. Hallister says. He stares numbly at his wife's body. The paramedics take her away, and the guests quietly begin to leave.

"Uncle Marvin," says Jerry, tugging at my sleeve. "You really gotta get the anger out. Really, Uncle Marvin."

The next letter arrives two days later. *Your language is filthy, and your characters are disgusting. You have fallen far short of what your mother wanted for you.*

Who the fuck does this lady think she is? I'm a famous playwright, for godsake. I'm very wealthy, with a beautiful loving wife. My mother can go to hell for all I care—unless she's there already.

"The anger!" Jerry cries the next afternoon, as we're driving out for ice-cream. He points at something on the side of the road. I pull over. It's a rhododendron tree. I remember: my mother once planted one of those. She tended it obsessively. I remember, she planted it on the hill where we could always see it. When the sun went down, it made a black silhouette. •



Business was business,  
after all, and a black  
hole trasher had work to  
do like anybody else.

## After Hours at the Black Hole

C. June Wolf

The thing about a black hole, Jude thought, was that once you threw something in there, that was it. No more coming back on you, no more problems, no more *complications*. It was good and tidy that way. Of course, there was always the chance, though he'd never known it to happen—that not everything that slipped across the event horizon remained uneventful for the rest of time—or timelessness, whatever.

And that was just what he was worrying about.

Working at all this crap for so long, Jude was nearly unfazeable. He had tugged so much across this vicinity of space he couldn't count the lightness of the years anymore, and had no idea how much of what he'd volleyed in that time he might at one, more ethical period of his life, have had regrets about. Business was business, after all, and a black hole trasher had work to do like anybody else. Never mind the delicacies of ethics or right. He would have thrown away his own mother (he liked to joke) if she hadn't thrown him away first. For a price, of course, and a handsome one. He had towed space dirt of every kind, from the rubble of abandoned colonies to the floating jetsam of war—living or very, very dead—to the entrails of planets that had somehow gotten tangled up in somebody's personal space. Any old thing you'd pay him for—he didn't mind. But today's cargo was a whole other



thing, and it worried him.

So, okay. Maybe those trusty black holes had swallowed everything so far without a burp. But he thought he'd spotted some energy shimmering where it ought not to last time he was circling Old Guzzler here, not just harmless vacuum fluctuations, but something else. It was nothing he could pin down instrumentally and he let it go and pattered back for his next "desperately urgent" something that needed to be lugged away.

Now here he was, moving in slowly, a handful of light years from Old G, with a long trailer of ruinous lives in his wake, and he was getting nervous.

He hadn't meant to ask the fellow what it was. But the guy was all white suit and glowing smile and intruded his philosophy into everything, so it was no surprise that he took Jude's grunt to mean, "Tell me in exhaustive detail what it is I am hauling out to wing down into Old Guzzler because I am just so interested in everything you think and do." Which the guy proceeded to do, to the increasing discomfort of one long-haul space trucker with no taste for the unliving, or the un-lived or badly lived or—*whatever*.

"It's a procedure," the guy said all Prince of Lightness-y, spinning slowly in his chair with one white-clad leg propped regally across the other, "known as Soul-Stripping. Ha, ha, ha!"—his laugh sounded rehearsed—"We don't strip out the souls, of course, but strip off all the clutter and junk that makes them, and the lives they live, so untasteful and wicked and *dull*." That too-bright smile again. Bring down the eye-shades.

"People's lives, you see, are made up of a series of infinitely tiny and infinitely large decisions, endlessly made and yet barely attended to in the person's mind, and each has consequences in not only the outward but the inward parts of that individual's life. Eventually, the whole is so clogged up it isn't possible to make a single clear decision—because we are so mucked up with the crud of the years that we are no longer basing anything at all on the moment at hand, but all of it on the sticky goo that is now leading, if not in any way *living*, our lives.

"It's really very yukky—" that laugh again, like a soft solar drill, thutting against Jude's head. "You can see what I mean." Jude tried real hard not to seem to be listening. That was enough for Glow-Boy. He lunged on. "So we strip it off. Strip off the crud accrued one gungey

layer at a time and fling it—thip! Thip! Thwap! into a thing we call the Black Hole."

Now this got Jude's attention. Eh?

Glowy smiled again. "Of course it isn't really a black hole. Our clients see this icky substance stripped off of their thoughts, their memories, their impulses, their loves, and it is an incredible liberation. They lighten immeasurably. They straighten out strangled muscles, strangled lives. It is a wonderful thing to see, every time. But the goo is still in there, in the Black Hole, and there is nothing we have found to do with it, or to it, that either turns it into something useful, or gets it utterly and permanently beyond their reach.

"You see," he uncrossed his legs and leaned forward intensely, elbows digging into smooth knees, "there is a connection, a strand of energy so infinitesimally small that no one but us has even discovered it yet, that links each person to each bit of yik that we pull out of them. As long as the scrubblings are in the Black Hole, there is no real problem. There may be barely detectable tremors along the strands sometimes but no customer has felt it yet. They are able to go on and live their lives in wondrous new ways. But we are concerned. What would happen if one day—!poof!—one of those strands got strong enough that it smucked its attendant yik back out from the Black Hole and splatted it right up against the poor unsuspecting customer again—maybe in the middle of a critical business deal, or in the process of making love? The consequences could be disastrous. We could be sued."

He sat back, looking vaguely real for the first time. This guy was really worried. Maybe *he* oughtta have a soul-stripping. But, he recovered. The smile: "And that is why, my friend, we have come to you. To put a truly toxic, galaxy-grade weapon out of commission for all time—our customers' combined millenia of bad and stupid living—and keep our company safely afloat and at the top of our wondrous game."

A creep. But in this limited sphere of criminalia, an honest one. Because of course, trucking anything at all—even energy, even bad decisions—that could logically be argued to be part of a living human being, was no, no, no on the black hole blacklist, and that was simply that.



Ugh. What a freak show. And here he was hauling it right up to the

gaping mouth of Old Guzzler itself. Never mind Glow, and never mind the planetloads of customers. What would happen to *him* if any of that spewed back out and caught him in the backside out in space? Better hope Old Guzzler doesn't take a leak on Jude today.



Here he goes then. Jude is circling in to the vicinity of Old Guzzler, tucked deep in the island universe, el Tetratis. The wash of stars in soft bright spirals spanned out unimaginably vast as he hurtled toward them, all but motionless in sensation, yet gaining on the galaxy at stunning speed. Clusters of young blue stars, reddish gatherings of stars in the making, and a vast density of white light in the centre, Tetratis was a beauty that even Jude could still appreciate. For a moment, the apprehension about his cargo took a backseat to that familiar feeling of *wow*. She sure was a stunner.

Somewhere in her centre, fuelling all that wonderful star production, was a supermassive black hole. No black hole trasher with the slightest grey matter still in the hold would ever try trucking into one of those. But over there, off to one side of the densest region of stars in Tetratis, was a nice little "binary twin" black hole he had shimmied up to more than once in his lifetime. And now, his first shipment of crappy lives was about to strike Old Guzzler right in the b.h. kisser.

Once he flung a cargo close enough Old G did the rest, sucking it in with all the power of the collapsed star it was. Jude snorted to himself at the old joke. They seem all-powerful when they're dazzling their audience as stars, but watch 'em collapse on themselves and they turn all sucky and whiney till the day they die. No matter how hard they suck, ain't *nobody's* gonna fawn over them anymore. But don't worry. Ignore them for a few billion years and eventually they'll go away.



And there it was. Jude slowed The Tug slightly as Old Guzzler came square into view. In amongst the spilled jewels of stars, next to its buddy star (Bootleg Pete) was a modest-size shiny black orb just hovering in nothing, and he was sailing right for it. Cargo forgotten, he threw himself into the routine. Couplers were set ready for



detachment, target selected, The Tug's stabilizers and cargo placement rockets simultaneously fired. Like a harpoon destined for a blubbery side, the container was set in motion, gathering more speed as rockets continued to fire, sailing toward the black hole in fluid precision. Soon, the fuel would all be gone. But it wouldn't matter anymore. Crap and container, it would coast on until Old Guzzler was licking its shiny lips and giving a nice polite smile of thanks. Not that he would actually see that. The stuff would just kind of fade away, long after he'd left for the next run. But it was fun to imagine.

Jude's shoulders perceptibly relaxed. The crap of lives trailing behind him was gone.

He got ready to buzz away. He triple-checked the shot. Trajectory and velocity were good; he'd nailed it, right on course. Still, he couldn't shake the feeling that this wasn't a place he really wanted to be anymore. He turned tail and got the hell out of there.



Jude was just flickering back into regular space when he felt the tug on The Tug. Everything in him set to tingling in alarm. It was just a gentle tug but he knew without a doubt where it had come from. He looked down at his controls, and if God had been in existence just then He would have been mighty surprised to see Jude pray.

Back at el Tetratis, things were getting pretty weird. In the vicinity of Guzzler and Bootleg Pete, they were even weirder than normal around the old event horizon. A container of foolish and freaky, angry and lost, desperate and astonishing, inspired and blessed, amazed and horrified, impulsive and long over-thought decisions was being stretched and splintered and set free, yet frozen on the horizon above Old Guzzler's mighty maw, and a billion dark strands of unbreakable filaments of energy were vibrating faster and faster even as everything else held heart-stoppingly still. Unbelievably, had anyone been there to watch and believe or not, they reached far across space through nonexistent wormholes, bisected garlands of strings, pierced planets and plunged through suns of monstrous size, unharmed, unaltered, unalterable. Old Guzzler was getting a massive ache in the gut.

Jude felt The Tug slowing frighteningly, felt the thrill of a billion cold wires of questing energy find their way into him, curling tight

around each peptide and grain of self, anchoring in every breath and crackling synapse. Tighter and tighter to him they wrapped themselves, hitch-hikers, hijackers, little German children left to wander and die in the wicked woods by evil parents, clutching at the only thing that connects them still to the lives they left behind, and through Jude they shot forward, strangling him from the inside out, shot through space with unheard of urgency and plunged toward the earth, the colonies, the satellites, the stars, everywhere in the hundred light year radius that was Soul Strip territory. And plunged on through to the ones who'd tried to rid themselves of them.

Old Guzzler heaved. The sucker who wouldn't exhale, the drinker who never puked, the swallower of all heaved hell-bent for mercy and out they spewed. Everything it had ever gulped came, too. Radiation, planets, ships, time. Blowing out like a firehose on speed, splattering the island universe, and through it, and beyond. With them went everything that Guzzler was, radiating off every quantum of its mass, till the one who had once dramatically collapsed now fizzled suddenly out, and Old Pete had no one left to slurp up all his booty.

But Old Pete beamed numbly on, and el Tetratis continued, unimpressed, in its making and extinguishing of stars.

• • •

Glowy Boy looked up from his desk, a strange sensation entering his consciousness. It was the pop of a billion accounts, he was sure. He frowned terribly, jerking his head around, jumping up to react but having nowhere, nowhere to go. Inside, he felt the downward slide into confusion, the bliss-less collision of a million furious thoughts, discarded on the road in a dirty little cardboard box, come back home after all this travelling, not run over, not dead, not going away, no how. And *mightily* pissed off.

He slumped into his chair again, and sobbed. •

The first time Mark had met the boy, probably mid-September, he had almost wept.

# Coming Back to Kabul

Dave Whittier

Almost any soldier will tell you, coming back to Kabul is worse than going there the first time.

The first time, back in August, had at least been an adventure, something new. The Task Force soldiers were eager, wrapped up in the thrill of deployment. They trained hard, made their administrative preparations, drew their uniforms and equipment, packed their bags, and attended a few too many ceremonies before they finally got on the bus to the airport. The experiences yet to come made separation from family and friends, and the loss of home's creature comforts, much more bearable, at least for most.

It was the second time into theatre that really got to you. Each soldier was entitled to a period of leave at some point in the tour, to be taken either at home or a third location of his or her choosing. Now that the novelty of another deployment had worn off, most people dreaded, at least a little bit, returning and wished for nothing more than a day or two more to relax.

Not so for Major Mark Walsh. In fact, the two and a half week's home leave, after almost four months in Afghanistan, had been for him like picking at a scab. He had stood as the head of a counterfeit family, fine at first glance but not able to hold up under scrutiny.



Everyone had been exceedingly polite, although Mark still saw the accusation in Lisa's eyes when a neighbor or a friend unwittingly made some reference to swimming or the lake, and the vision of little Andrew on the dock seared his memory. Mark had gone through all the motions of being a father with Nicholas: trips to the amusement park, lunches at McDonald's, evenings spent playing Harry Potter on the computer, homework together at the dining room table. Through it all Mark saw the signs of his ultimate failure: the box stuffed with toys and thrown in a corner of the basement, the now neglected Big Grizzly bicycle hanging from a hook like an accusation in the cluttered garage, the four faint indentations on the carpet on one side of Nicholas' room. Eight months had passed and Nick still wouldn't let clutter stray into "Andrew's" half.

Mark felt ashamed of his relief at getting back to Afghanistan. It's funny, he thought as he passed through the front gate on the way to Monday market, dressed in uniform and flak vest. Four days back and he could almost forget he had ever been home. Despite the long days, rocket attacks, bomb threats and the constant low-grade anxiety he felt at just being there, Mark fell into the Camp Julien routine like a junkie would fall on his latest hit, and the guilt made his pain all the more cutting.

Monday market. Six days out of seven the area just outside the main gate was an open lot, but on Mondays it transformed into an Eastern bazaar. Everywhere Mark went, there were peddlers hawking an astonishing array of items, everything from antiques and rugs to sunglasses and DVDs. He wandered, surrounded by supplicant merchants, the timid ones calling out from their stalls, the more aggressive clutching at hand or sleeve in an attempt to pull him over to see their wares.

"Mister!" called one, a short man in traditional *perahan tunban*, a knee-length shirt worn over baggy trousers and tied with a drawstring.

"Sir, come here!" cried another, younger, wearing a two-piece brown suit with white shirt, and sporting a knee length black leather jacket.

"Come see my shop!"

"You need rug? I have best ones here!"

"Special price for you, my friend. No profit for me today, no profit!"

Through it all, Mark kept walking, nodding to the merchants and

prying the occasional hand off his forearm. He wasn't in a buying mood, and made sure not to show too much interest in any particular item, or he might get drawn into a bartering session he didn't want. Mark would never be adept at haggling, but he'd learned to endure it. He had decided early on in the tour if he got something he wanted and the price made him happy, then so what if he could have paid less by trying a little harder? It mattered little; half the trinkets and gifts Mark had purchased over the months had been picked up out of habit; Andrew's share of the souvenirs remained in Mark's tent, usually until he threw them out.

Mark paused at a gap in the line of stalls. Every time he had shopped before, a boy had been set up right here. A small lad, about eight or nine, who wore his *Chitrali* perched saucily on his head, he would trot out into the stream of soldiers and start to work the crowd.

"Mister, come here," he would say, a lilting, singsong quality to his halting English. "Mister, come here and see my shop. I am businessman. We do good business, yes?"

Anyone who acquiesced would then be dragged over to the boy's shop, a three-foot square folding table sequestered between a sweaty rug merchant and an ancient, one-legged leatherworker. On the table he had placed a sparse collection of merchandise: rubber snakes, pre-Taliban Afghani money, scorpions cast in Lucite and made into key chains, assorted knickknacks. Once the unsuspecting bargain seeker started picking over the items, the young entrepreneur would launch into a sales pitch with all the solemnity and seriousness of a budding Trump orchestrating a real estate deal.

The first time Mark had met the boy, probably mid-September, he had almost wept. He should have gone back to camp. He should have turned around right there and gone back to his tent, his desk and the job keeping him sane, but he stopped. He could remember a time when Andrew's favorite game had been to play store, and if he closed his eyes, just for a moment, he could almost see the Fisher Price cash register and the neatly arranged shelves of plastic food and assorted Lego pieces as Andrew proudly awaited his next customer. When Mark opened his eyes again, the hot Afghan sun shattered his memories like they were dried flowers.

The bartering had been for form's sake only, but it had been the hardest thing Mark had done since the funeral. Bent over almost double

so he could look the boy in the eye, Mark had pointed to an item and choked, "How much do you want for that?" The boy had quoted a number five or six times the thing's value, so Mark had offered half, then asked the kid to throw in another trinket, which started the whole process all over again. In the end, Mark had picked up two scorpion key chains, two toy snakes and around 8,000 Afghani in old currency worth maybe eight bucks US in total. He had paid way more for the stuff than he had to, but the intense pride on the boy's face at having rooked yet another foreign soldier had been his methadone for the day. Having felt its faint touch, he had been hooked, and every market day since, he'd come back for a fix.

Today the boy was gone. Mark made a halfhearted attempt to spot the *Chitrali* in amongst the tightly packed soldiers and sellers, but with no luck. Bitterly disappointed, Mark cut his shopping trip short and headed back to camp.

The sky that night was perfect. The cold November air was crystal clear, the stars set like searchlights in the absolute ebony of Allah's heaven. The three quarter moon over Mark's head gave the Kabul landscape the appearance of a pastel portrait in blue and grey, with the occasional splash of brown. The snow on the mountains to the east and west almost glowed, and to the south, the Queen's Palace looked over the camp with an air of quiet majesty hidden during day's harsh light, when the Afghan sun revealed her to be a shattered and crumbling ruin.

Mark paused for a moment to drink in the otherworldly beauty and continued down Athena Road toward the tent lines. He paused just across from the postal detachment and, rather than turning right toward his own tent, he headed north along Perimeter Road.

In a nearby bunker's shadowy darkness, Mark could see a faint silhouette. It did not move, even as he approached, and as he came closer to the shadowy figure he saw a young boy's image. Mark stopped.

"Andrew?" he asked, and was overcome with bleak shame. There was no more Andrew.

The boy was dressed as he had been when Mark first saw him: *perahan tunban* over ragged corduroy pants, and a faded leather jacket to round out the odd ensemble, complete right down to the jaunty *Chitrali*. The boy reached toward Mark, palms up as if in supplication, and although his lips moved steadily, Mark could hear no sound. In



the dim light, the boy's palms looked almost black, as if he had been finger-painting with his entire hand.

Mark pulled a mini flashlight out of a pocket and turned it on. The tiny LED flooded the bunker with a brilliant blue light, and Mark's surprise turned to a moment of heart stopping shock as his flashlight revealed the bunker's tomblike interior—and nothing else. The boy had disappeared. Mark shone the light into the concrete and rock structure's every corner and crevice, but the bunker was empty.

Shaken, Mark rushed to his tent, stripped down to shorts and T-shirt as quickly as he could, and climbed into his sleeping bag. He could brush his teeth in the morning. Lying in bed, eyes wide open in the blackness, he pondered the vision he had just seen. What had just happened? A simple hallucination? Was the breakdown he had been trying to escape by taking this tour in the first place catching up to him anyhow? Or was he just a bereaved father who had lost a son, finally admitting to himself it was time to grieve. But how could he grieve, as if it wasn't even his fault? Of course, he couldn't. Sleep didn't come for a long time.

*He was drowning. He thrashed in the icy darkness as the seaweed, fatigue and panic dragged him inexorably down. Mark knew he was drowning, and mustered one final adrenaline fired rush of manic energy. With superhuman effort, his face broke the surface of the kelp-clogged lake. Help me, he screamed, please! I don't want to die!*

Mark vaguely noticed peeling off his sweat soaked T-shirt the next morning, and how terror's coppery stink permeated his bed space again. Nightmares, especially nightmares about that, were commonplace. After showering and dressing, Mark walked to the kitchen tent and chose his usual breakfast: scrambled eggs, sausages and potatoes, and a big mug of black coffee. He overfilled his mug, and the scalding liquid poured over his fingers before it dripped onto the coarse wooden floor. He barely felt it. Preoccupied with a vision of the boy, deep down he suspected he would snap under the strain.

He should never have come here. The sessions had been beginning to show promise, according to his counsellor, but Lisa's eyes, Mark thought, drove him away. He saw his anguish, torment and unrelenting, intolerable guilt reflected in her eyes, even clouded as they often were with fatigue or drug induced stupor. He'd had to leave, he thought, if only for six months, just long enough to get his act together. Lisa had

protested, but Mark had convinced himself it was only for form's sake.

Lost in painful reflection, Mark sat at the nearest available spot among the few dozen six-foot folding tables lining each side of the dining tent. The Task Force Surgeon, Colonel Allan White, was already seated across from him. Mark nodded. "Morning, sir." He adjusted his plate and seasoned his scrambled eggs with too much salt.

"Morning, Mark," said the colonel. "How goes it, this fine morning?"

"No complaints." This seemed to satisfy the older man, who grunted and set to his porridge. Mark noticed the colonel held his spoon oddly, gripped between index and middle fingers. "You okay, sir?"

The surgeon put down the spoon, then presented his hands, palms up. Mark grimaced. His palms, right down to the fingertips, were raw and scabbed. They looked almost black.

"Tripped last night outside the medical station," he explained. This was not a rare occurrence at Camp Julien. The defensive measures for the Task Force prohibited any illumination after hours, lest one become a target. People carried flashlights, but it was still easy to trip over a rock or walk into one of the many cans, barrels, bins or concrete dividers around the camp. Mark himself had walked into a chain link gate one moonless night; his legs and belly had been sore for days.

"Wow," Mark said. "Looks rough."

"Looks worse than it is." The colonel's fingers flexed. "Little tender right now, but I should be good as new in a week or so. I've just got to be more careful at night, that's all. Hey Mark, are you all right?"

As the older man spoke, Mark turned pale and dropped his fork, scrambled egg chunks scattering across the table like soggy yellow dice. *His hands! They looked just like the boy's!* Mumbling excuses, Mark stood and stumbled to his office tent, mind preoccupied with a growing dread.

The day, and two more like it, passed in a blessed fog of routine requests and numbing staff work. The camp had not been threatened by rocket attacks for some weeks, and Mark's time as the communications staff officer in the Task Force was mostly taken up with hounding Ottawa for the telecommunications gear he had requested when they first arrived in theatre. This he did with a relentless fanaticism, until his counterparts at National Defence Headquarters routinely screened any calls received from overseas, just in case.

The routine was Mark's lifeline to sanity. No picky little demands

of daily life at home, no job jar or Nick's quiet but insistent demands for attention, no pictures or toys to remind him of the unthinkable. Just his desk, cot and the occasional car bomb, and these were just fine with him.

It was almost nine o'clock Thursday night before fatigue eventually glued Mark's eyes shut and convinced him to pack it in for the day. Trying to clear his mind, he stood up, palms pressed to eyes. When he removed them, he cried out, and fell back into his chair with a wheezy thump. For there, huddled in a ball in the corner, rocking back and forth and holding skinny knees tight, sat the boy.

Blood pooled on the floor beneath him.

Mark jumped from his chair and nearly flew around the desk, stopping about ten feet away from the boy, close enough to see him shivering. His mouth still moved in soundless appeal, and his face held the same terror and grief Mark had seen in the mirror of the funeral parlour bathroom, wiping bile from his chin before heading out to Andrew's memorial service.

The blood on the floor spread, and Mark traced the flow up the one calf to a ragged hole just below the left knee. A wound. A wound was concrete, treatable, something Mark could deal with, not like that small casket. Falling back on instinct and training, Mark rushed back to his desk, grabbed the tactical vest hanging from a hook behind it, and pulled a field dressing from one pouch. Tearing open the package, Mark turned to find...

Nothing.

No boy, no blood, nothing but the same old plywood floor and curved canvas walls. The field dressing fell from nerveless fingers, and Mark didn't bother to close the door as he left for his sleeping tent. He wasn't even sure whether he took his boots off before collapsing onto the small canvas and aluminum cot. Sleep came like a hammer.

*As his vision cleared, Mark saw through the late-night mist a small figure's outline on the deck. His pounding heart froze. Oh God, no, he prayed. Please, God, not him. He's not strong enough, he's not big enough, he doesn't know the water like I do he'll never get me out of here and JESUS CHRIST GOD NO HE'S ONLY EIGHT YEARS OLD!!*

*Before his head went under again, Mark watched Andrew jump into the water, tentatively. He wanted to weep. He's holding his fucking nose, God, Mark thought. How is he supposed to swim? His head went under again, and*



just before he blacked out Mark felt the birdlike flutter of small fingers as they struggled for purchase. He continued to sink.

Mark woke crying, face slick with a betrayer's hot, bitter tears. He wiped the snot off his lip with one hand, and then gave a start as he heard motion around him.

*They heard me!* he thought, panicked. However, when the sounds continued and nobody came to his bed space, after a few moments he relaxed a bit. The sound seemed to be concentrated more to the north, toward the camp hospital. In the darkness and slowly, so as not to disturb the other occupants of the tent, Mark got up and grabbed his coat. Shivering, he clomped over to the growing commotion.

The hospital lines were in turmoil as people scurried back and forth between the door to the surgery and medical crew nearby. A single halogen spotlight illuminated the scene, and the alternating brilliance and shadow as medical staff walked between Mark and the light left him blinded. Mark approached a silhouetted figure to one side, and soon recognised Colonel White. The surgeon's face was a study in exasperation.

"Major, what are you doing out here? Get back to your tent, we've got a patient."

Mark was undeterred. "Sorry, sir," he said, "but I've got to know. What's happening?"

"All right," the surgeon huffed. "We had an Enn Dee up at the front gate. That's him there." He pointed to a shadowy figure being attended by a group of medics. Mark could make out bandages, a blanket and an IV bag. And blood.

ND—Negligent Discharge, every soldier's nightmare. Not only could firing a weapon by mistake injure or kill you or a buddy, but an ND usually resulted in a charge under the Code of Service Discipline. If you were found guilty it could mean a fine or jail time, plus you ran a good chance of being sent home.

The soldier on the ground had either accidentally shot himself, or had been shot by another soldier on guard duty. With a feeling of dawning horror, Mark remembered the boy. *The blood!*

"Where's he hit?" Mark asked. He felt heat rush to his cheeks.

"You don't need to know that, Major," the colonel said. "Now, if you don't mind, I. . ."

"Where'd he get hit?" Mark insisted. A medic looked up, then

continued with her bandaging.

“Look, if you must know, it was in the leg.”

“Which one?”

“Mark, I really...”

“Which one?” Mark yelled, grabbing the older officer and pulling him so their faces were mere inches apart. “*Which one?*”

“All right!” the surgeon cried and pushed Mark away with one arm. With the other he wiped a thin stream of spittle from his chin. “Christ! What is it with you? It was his left leg, okay? In the calf! Now get the hell back to bed. The Commander will hear about this in the morning.”

Mark went back to bed, but he couldn't sleep. He tossed the visions over in his mind, as he tossed himself and turned in his cot. The boy had scraped palms. The colonel had scraped palms. The boy had a hole in his leg. The soldier had a hole in his leg. What was happening? Was the boy causing this? If so, why? How? Or was he merely a messenger, a portent of misfortune soon to come?

Dawn found Mark still awake. Shortly after dawn he was standing at attention before Colonel Stone, the Task Force Commander. Colonel White's formal report lay in accusation on the desk between them. Colonel Stone seemed more concerned than angry and, after a short conversation in which he brusquely inquired into the state of Mark's mental and emotional health, inquiries Mark just as brusquely evaded or outright lied about, the Commander declared Mark had been working too hard. A few minutes with the Padre and a few days excused duty, at least until after the weekend, should be what he needed to make things right.

This was the last thing Mark wanted. The session with the Padre went about as he expected; he had spent enough time in counsellors' offices to know that dance by rote. Mark left the Padre's tent with the man convinced he was tired, a bit stressed (who wasn't?) but not about to go off the deep end.

The truth was much different; Mark could admit this to himself, even if he couldn't bring himself to concede the point to others. Time alone in his tent gave him time to think, which he did not want. Reading was impossible; he couldn't concentrate. The officer in the next bed space lent him a portable DVD player, but Mark couldn't find a movie vacuous or distracting enough to keep him interested. The

boy and Andrew consumed his thoughts, and soon were interchangeable in his mind. Andrew peddling scorpion key chains in the market. The boy jumping into the lake to save his drowning father. Andrew prostrate on the deck beneath him, with blue lips and oyster skin, lifeless eyes closing in time to Mark's chest compressions as he fought desperately to force a spark into the tiny body.

Christ, Mark thought, that part was real. But it couldn't be. How could his son be dead? Dead because of him? God, he prayed, let it be the boy from the market instead. He felt shame at the thought, but continued to pray. Let him be dead and my son alive. Better yet, he thought for the millionth time, let it be me. It should have been me. I'm the one who should have been dumped on the dock like a side of beef; I'm the one who should be dead, not him. Not my boy.

This went on for three more days. Whenever the seclusion was too much and the walls felt as if they would collapse on him, Mark went for a walk. It didn't help. The guileless sympathy from people he knew turned his tent into a refuge and drove him back. It was the same look he saw on faces back home: sympathy, sadness, pain, everything except the one thing Mark himself superimposed on those faces. The one thing he saw above all else from friends, family, members of the Task Force, his wife. Accusation.

Monday morning, market day. Mark rose, washed the nightmare stink down the shower drain for another day and dressed for work. He hoped there were a hundred e-mails waiting for him on his computer; he trembled in anticipation at the thought. Throwing on his flak vest and grabbing his helmet, Mark opened the door to his tent and walked out.

The boy stood outside the door.

Just as before, dressed exactly the same, with the same mask of terror and grief. No blood on his leg this time, but his face and *perahan tunban* front were crimson, glistening in the already pink Afghan dawn. Again his mouth worked silently and again his arms stretched out in supplication. This time, though, something was different. The boy held an object in one grimy hand, and as Mark leaned forward to get a better look he saw with no particular surprise the boy was translucent and he could just make out the tent behind him. The thing in the boy's hand was pink, with a soft texture, like fur. With a dawning horror, Mark recognised it as a small toy pig.



Nicholas' favourite.

With a moaning wail, Mark took off, running *through* the boy as he headed at full speed up McCrae Road to his office tent. As the two made contact the boy vanished, with an almost audible pop. The pig remained behind for a split second and had begun to fall to the gravel before it, too, disappeared.

Mark threw open the tent door with a crash and lurched into the room, dropping his helmet on the ground and leaving it to roll about on the tile floor. There was nobody at work yet, though he would neither have noticed nor cared had there been. Mark grabbed the phone, punched in the code for an international trunk and dialled his home number. On the other end, the phone picked up on the first ring.

"Hello?" Lisa.

"It's me," Mark said, struggling to control his voice. "What happened?"

"What? Mark? How did you know?"

"Never mind that right now. What happened?" Mark could see the world beginning to constrict around him, like looking through a tube. The tinfoil edge of a waking nightmare pierced his mind.

"There was an accident at school. Nicholas was running around at recess and slipped on a patch of ice. He hit his head on a slide or something and got a bloody nose." A pause. The tunnel got smaller. "He's okay, Mark. Just a lot of blood, looked worse than it was. I just got him home and he's having a hot bath. Mark, what's wrong? Mark?"

Mark's throat constricted until he couldn't speak. He could barely breathe. What's next, he thought. Who's next? So far the child's injuries were minor, but he still seemed to feel the pain. What if the injuries become more serious? What happens when it's so bad the boy stops coming?

Mark massaged his throat and eventually restored a free flow of air.

"Nothing," he choked. "I just had the feeling that something... bad had happened."

"It's okay, Mark," came the response, after the few seconds delay of satellite communications. "He's okay."

A pause.

"Mark?" Tentative.

"Yeah?" Mark said, voice still husky with emotion.

"We miss you here, Mark. Both of us. We really do."

"Yeah." Once again the tears flowed and Mark's windpipe felt like a straw. "Yeah, me too." He hung up.

Half blind, he stumbled from the tent and ran as fast as he could for the front gate. Market day. Surely somebody there would know what had happened to the boy, where he was, what was happening now. He had to find out why his already fragile world was being threatened even more. There had to be an answer.

Mark dashed past the gate guards, ignoring their questioning looks. Still running full out, he circled the perimeter wall to the lot where the market was held. The stalls were in various stages of assembly, their owners raising tubular frames to hang carpets, laying out rugs and scarves, assembling tables and chatting amongst themselves. Mark didn't stop until he came to where the boy used to set up shop. The old leatherworker leaned on a homemade crutch, the sun-cured skin on face and hands looking about as tough as the wares on his table. When Mark grabbed his arm, his eyes went wide, but he showed no other reaction.

"Where is he?" Mark said.

"Sir?" The man made no motion save to respond, perhaps remembering a time when an ill considered move or word cost a man a beating, or his life.

"The boy! Where is the boy?"

"The boy? Ah, Hazmal," the man said, his eyes growing gentle. "So sorry, sir. Hazmal is dead."

Mark dropped his hand, more frightened than when he hadn't known.

"What happened?" he whispered.

"Is sad," the man said, English halting at first but slowly improving, as if it was a language he had been intimate with a long time ago, but hadn't used much since. "Hazmal was flying kite, just over there." With a sweep of his gnarled hand the old man indicated a field just adjacent to the lot where the market grew.

"Then what?" Mark asked, although in his heart he already knew the answer.

"*Maain Zameeni*, sir," the old man said. "A land mine took him. His kite fell into field and he went to get it. It was very sad, but very quick."

Land mines. Afghanistan had the second highest mine concentration in the world. They killed and maimed more children every week.

The boy, Hazmal, had died needlessly, trying to rescue a few pennies' worth of wood, plastic and string. His death just as pointless as...

At this, Mark knew what he had to do.

"Show me where," he told the old man. "Come with me and show me exactly where."

Still holding the man's arm, Mark strode across the market lot to the field's edge. His pace forced the man into a hopping sort of shuffle just to keep up. When he came to the red painted rocks showing the edge of the still active minefield, Mark kept walking, but the old man wrenched his arm out of Mark's grip and stopped, bouncing on one skinny leg as he struggled to get his crutch in place. Mark looked back.

The boy stood there behind the old man, translucent body almost shimmering in the early morning sun. Mark looked beyond him and saw a soldier from the camp, weapon at the ready, running across the market lot toward him. He yelled something and looked angry. Mark didn't care.

Turning his back on boy, man and soldier, and turning his back on every bit of common sense and training ever drilled into him, Mark ran. Oblivious of his surroundings, heedless of the risks, his entire being concentrated on finding the kite, Mark ran. He continued until he saw the red and white plastic kite that had cost Hazmal his life, wedged behind a rock and almost hidden from view. Pausing long enough to reach down and snag the toy from its resting-place, Mark ran back.

When Mark crossed the minefield's border, winded but alive, he jogged up to the boy, to Hazmal, who had become almost opaque in his solidity. Hazmal reached out, a look of rapture on his dirty face. Mark gave him the kite and for a split second he could have sworn the grinning boy clutched it to his breast, but it must have been the wind, for the toy floated down and came to rest a few feet from them. The boy pressed palms together, chest high and nodded once.

Then, still smiling, Hazmal disappeared.

What had happened hit Mark and collided with his reality like a gravestone. Weeping, he dropped to hands and knees, crawled to the kite and cradled it in his arms, crying with the deep, braying sobs he had not been able to allow himself until now. The old man watched from nearby. He seemed unperturbed by the whole event and limped toward Mark, hands clasping his crutch.



"Why do you cry?" he asked.

"Because he's dead," Mark wailed. "He's dead and there's nothing I can do about it."

"But you did do something," the old man said. "You gave him back his kite. His soul is content. See?" he said, waving to the empty space behind them.

"He didn't have to die," Mark insisted, still sobbing, the kite gripped in one quivering hand. "Why didn't he just stay where it was safe? Why did he have to come after me like that?" A kite spar snapped, like a small bone.

The old man opened his mouth as if to speak, then closed it with a nod and a smile of understanding. He placed a sun-dried, withered hand on Mark's head. When he spoke, his voice was gentle, like the father Mark had always wanted to be.

"The boy you speak of, he died protecting something he loved. That something is safe and the truth of this is with him. He may go now to Allah in peace. Do not dishonour his memory by destroying what he died to save. *Kho-Da Hafez*, friend. Goodbye. Be at peace."

Pausing to adjust his crutch, the old man limped back to the market, leaving Mark kneeling in the dirt, the ragged kite clutched in one hand. Mark stood and, with shuddering breath, wiped his eyes. Tentatively, he tried fitting the two broken spar ends together. They fit, the crack where the pieces joined almost invisible. Mark nodded through flowing tears.

Maybe he could still fix this.

Nicholas would love it. •

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2006

# WRITING CONTESTS

## The Banff Centre Bliss Carman Poetry Award\*

(1, 2 or 3 poems per entry,  
maximum 150 lines)



Judge: Lorna Crozier

## Short Fiction

(one story per entry,  
maximum 15,000 words)

Judge: Sandra Birdsell



## Creative Non-Fiction

(one article per entry,  
maximum 5,000 words)

Judge: Stan Dragland

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## CONTEST RULES

- Entry fee \$27. This entitles you to a one-year (4 issues) subscription to *Prairie Fire* magazine. Make cheque or money order payable to *Prairie Fire* and enclose with your entry.
- Do not identify yourself on your entry. Enclose a cover sheet with your name, address, telephone number, the title(s) of your piece(s), and word count (prose) or line count (poetry). On occasion, *Prairie Fire* Press makes subscriber names and addresses available to external organizations. If you do not wish to receive such mailings, please state this clearly on your cover sheet.
- Your entry must be typed on 8-1/2" x 11" white paper and the pages clipped, not stapled. Prose must be double-spaced. No faxed or e-mailed submissions, please.
- Entries will not be returned. If you wish to be informed of contest results, include a stamped, self-addressed envelope.
- Each piece must be original, unpublished, not submitted elsewhere for publication or broadcast, nor accepted elsewhere for publication or broadcast, nor entered simultaneously in any other contest or competition for which it is also eligible to win a prize.
- You may enter as often as you like; only your first entry in each category will be eligible for a subscription.
- Winning pieces will be published in *Prairie Fire* magazine, with authors paid for publication.

\* The Poetry first prize is donated in part by The Banff Centre, who will also award a jeweller-cast replica of poet Bliss Carman's silver and turquoise ring to the first-prize winner.

DEADLINE FOR ALL CONTEST ENTRIES: NOVEMBER 30, 2006

## about our contributors

**John Southern Blake** resides in the wilds of Calgary where he earns a modest living corrupting the minds of university undergraduates. In another life, he was trained as a scholar and published several brilliant but lamentably unread works on the history of the Old World.

**Leah Bobet** lives in Toronto, where she studies Linguistics and works in Canada's oldest science fiction bookstore. Her work has appeared recently in *The Year's Best Science Fiction and Fantasy for Teens*, *Strange Horizons*, and *Realms of Fantasy*. Anything else she's not plausibly denying can be found at [www.leahbobet.com](http://www.leahbobet.com).

**Elaine Chen** received an Aurora nomination for Artistic Achievement this year. She lives and works in Toronto, Canada. Her website is [www.elainechen.com](http://www.elainechen.com).

**Kevin Cockle** lives in Alberta where he toils for The Man, begs for extra lumps of coal, scrounges for additional bowls of cold porridge and scratches out tales of the fantastic under flickering candlelight. His first novel should be on shelves as soon as he can figure out how to rip off David Gemmel without being caught.

**Jude Dillon:** Born in Kingston, Ontario. Graduated English from Queen's. News-photographer for the Kingston Whig-Standard and the Calgary Albertan. Studied painting at Alberta College of Art and Design. Plays guitar and harmonica. Favourite painter Cézanne. Favourite poet Theodore Roetke. Writes full time.

**S. Evans** is a pediatrician. She has been published in *Strange Horizons*, *Talebones*, *Challenging Destiny*, and *Fortean Bureau*, among other venues.

**Matthew Johnson** is a writer and teacher who is glad to be living in Ottawa again, exploring the joys of home ownership with his beautiful wife Megan. His first published story, *Closing Time* (in the Summer 2001 *On Spec*), received an Honorable Mention in *The Year's Best Science Fiction #19*. He has stories forthcoming in *Space and Time* and the



anthology *Time for Bedlam*; he has written two novels, *Fall From Earth* and *Fire In Your Heart*, which are currently touring slush piles worldwide (consult your travel agent).

**Helena Krobath** lives in the Fraser Valley, BC, where she has just finished her undergrad work. This is her first publication ever.

**Daniel LeMoal** currently lives and writes in Winnipeg's famed North End. While Mr. LeMoal admits he once worked in retail, he insists he isn't bitter about the experience in the least.

**Bill Stuart** has been previously published in the book *Strange New Worlds IV* with the short story *Irridium-7-tetrahydroxoate Crystals Are a Girl's Best Friend*. Currently he is attempting to produce a movie and finish a novel. Bill lives in Ottawa, Canada.

**Dave Whittier** recently retired from the Canadian military after more than 24 years and is a veteran of three overseas tours, including one to Afghanistan. He, his wife and two boys are in the process of moving to Vancouver, BC. *Coming Back to Kabul* is his first sale.

**C. June Wolf** lives in Vancouver, B.C. in one little room with three little cats. She enjoys OTSS gardening (Only The Strong Survive), compa music, and the works of Avram Davidson. Casey can stumble her way through a conversation in Haitian Creole, drinks tea with maple syrup, and is an excellent co-counsellor. Her first story, *The Coin*, about an encounter between a street kid and a mysterious woman in Haiti, appeared in *Tesseract 9*. *Strange Horizons* has published two of Casey's interviews—of speculative fiction writers Eileen Kernaghan and Mike Coney. These can be found on the web at: <http://www.strangehorizons.com/Archive.alt.pl?Dept=c>

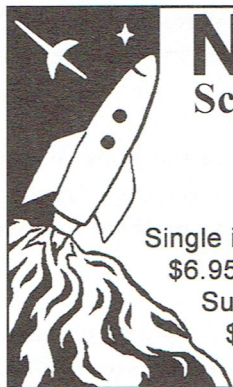
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