



**IN SOME WAY, NUMBERS MUST BE IMPORTANT TO  
THE STORY. EITHER SPECIFIC NUMBERS, OR THE  
CONCEPT OF NUMBERS, OR MAYBE JUST ONE  
NUMBER...**

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# SubMishMash All The Way

The pilot test of SubMishMash (SMM) for mini-contest #14 exceeded all my realistic hopes and went straight into Sheer Optimism Land. A few people complained that they couldn't embellish their entries with bolds and italics, but that wasn't SMM's fault, that was ours. We wanted to keep things simple for the pilot by restricting entries to plain text. For regular contests, you can upload word processing files with embellished formatting (though you should probably keep such formatting to a minimum, just as a general principle of good fiction writing).

So, as you're probably tired of hearing, for the foreseeable future, OTP will accept submissions *only* through SMM's system. The "submit" link is on the same page as the contest premise.

But let me tell you some behind-the-scenes secrets about why we're changing systems. Sure, no one seems to mind. In fact a lot of people love the system. But the *real* reason we're switching is, the old way of taking entries through e-mails was driving us crazy. It was much more time-consuming, it was harder to read entries from remote locations, keeping all the e-mail addresses straight *and* anonymous was difficult...

Basically, we wanted to outsource all the story/author cataloguing. We even considered paying someone else to do it, but we didn't want to go that route because we'd have probably needed to implement a contest fee to pay for that person's time, and what if we couldn't find someone as dedicated to the cause as we were? Plus WE DON'T EVER, EVER WANT TO HAVE A CONTEST FEE. So I started investigating submission systems, and now our administrative workload is less than half of what it used to be.

But remember, if enough of you folks had hated the system, we wouldn't have switched. You're why we exist. If you didn't write, and you didn't read, we wouldn't publish.

If you have an opinion on any of this, let me know by writing to [Feedback@OnThePremises.com](mailto:Feedback@OnThePremises.com). In the meantime, enjoy Issue #14 of *On The Premises*!

Keep writing and reading,

Tarl Roger Kudrick and Bethany Granger  
co-publishers of On The Premises magazine

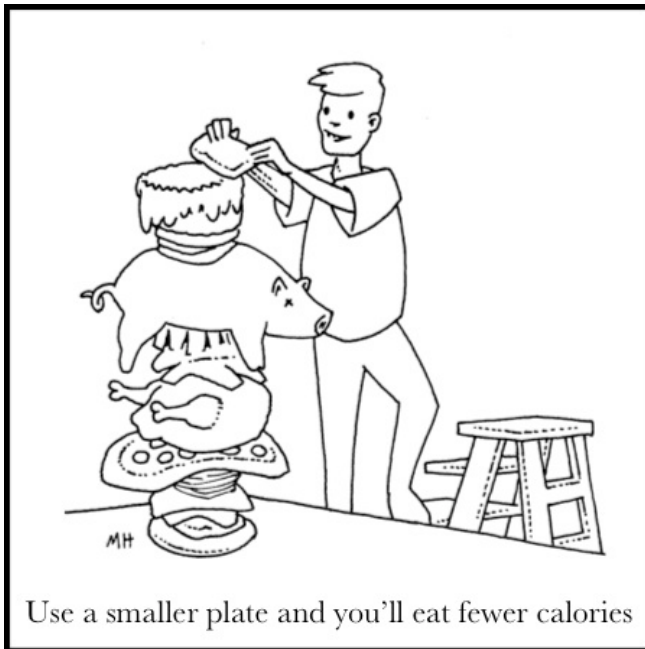
# Cartoons!

by Matt Howarth (art) and Tarl Kudrick (writing)

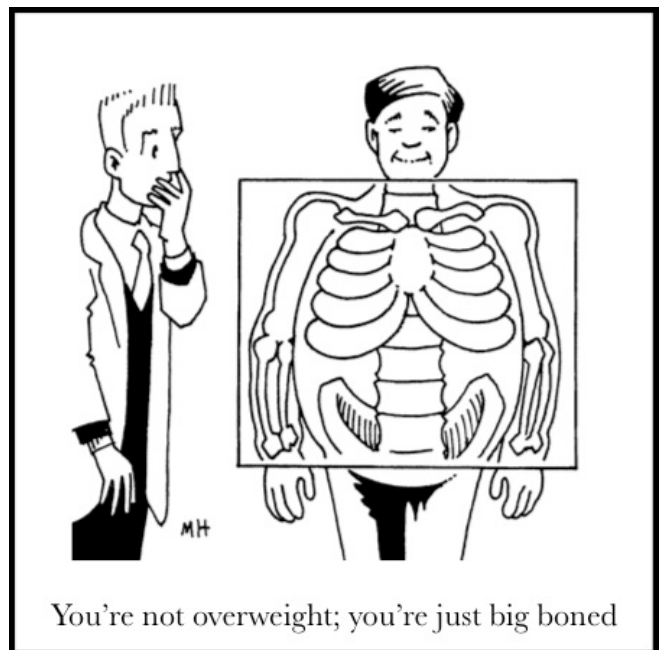
One area of life where nearly everyone, sooner or later, faces the numbers is when standing on the scale. Getting to, and then maintaining, a healthy weight is never easy. (Tarl ought to know—he used to weigh over 190 pounds, but has been at a healthy 154 or so for the last seven years.<sup>1</sup>)

Bethany Granger (writer) and Matt Howarth (illustrator) combine to bring us:

## Dieting Myths We Wish Were True



<sup>1</sup> And as of Sept. 2015, for the last 11 years.



## FIRST PRIZE

C.R. Hodges lives in Colorado with his wife, three teenage daughters and a dog. When he is not writing, playing the tuba or coaching youth softball, he runs an engineering company and is a clean-tech entrepreneur. He has had short stories published in *The First Line* and *Bards and Sages Quarterly*.

# Three-Quarters Martian

by C.R. Hodges

The first man to walk on the moon was a hero to five generations. The first woman to walk on Mars was forgotten even before her boots plunked into the red dust.

\*

“Hey,” a husky voice said in the dark.

I ignored her. The Swedish hockey team was calling to me from the sauna.

“Anna-Jing.” Same voice. A large hand grasped my shoulder.

I was losing my battle to recapture the fading dream.

“Wake up,” commanded a new voice in a rich brogue, “now.”

I took a deep breath, tasting the dust in the cool air, then slowly opened my eyes. Pulling the threadbare blanket around me, I sat up in my hammock.

Kaiza, the first and likely last aboriginal Australian to teach planetary astrophysics at Stanford, gently removed her hand from my shoulder. “Trouble in Florida.”

“The launch isn’t today,” I said, still groggy. Our resupply rocket was scheduled to lift off from Cape Lee in a week. We needed this one—the last launch, from Kazakhstan, had crashed in West Korea.

“There won’t be a fucking launch,” said Mick, our mission commander. He gestured at the wall screen, which snapped to life. Grainy footage showed a giant rocket lying on its side like a beached whale, next to a familiar gantry. A dozen old pickups were parked beyond the shattered nosecone. Scores of horses and four oxen grazed nearby, a web of cables and ropes leading back to the rocket. A horde of men and women in shorts and tank tops, flip-flops and baseball caps, were prying metal panels from the side of the rocket. Hundreds more lay dead on the ground, interspersed with the bodies of gray vested soldiers.

“Where are the pitchforks and torches?” I asked. No reply.

A helicopter arrived, ten commandos zip-lining to the ground just meters from the camera crew. Seventy looters went down in the first minute, but then flight after flight of arrows from unseen archers decimated the commandos.

“Goodbye freeze-dried steak and potatoes,” said Mick.

“Goodbye replacement mini reactor.” I pointed at the four oxen dragging a sled with a brightly marked container the size of a large desk on it.

Gotta crank the thermostat down again,” said Mick. He lumbered off to make it so.

The last image we witnessed before a sword crashed down on the camera lens was a line of children siphoning kerosene from the rocket’s fuel tank into buckets. Goodbye civilization.

\*

Carrying a basket of mushrooms three times my size, I trudged back to the main module from the redhouse. As I passed the *Gagarin*, I searched for those first boot prints—my boot prints—but they were covered in dust. I should’ve at least gotten a shoe contract.

The crew was waiting for me just inside the airlock. The mushrooms, the one food item that we could grow in near native conditions, added flavor to endless soy-based meals despite being red and gritty. They were not, however, tasty enough to warrant an all hands greeting.

“The Chinese sent the offer,” said Gabriel before I had my helmet off. He was our geologist and physician.

“And what is the emperor proposing?” I asked. It had been three weeks of frustrating negotiations. We desperately needed provisions; they had the only rockets left.

Mick shrugged and tossed me the tablet. “My Mandarin is limited to ordering up pints and whores.”

“He’d pay more for a pint,” said Olga, my copilot and Mick’s former hammock buddy. Her quirky sense of humor had helped us through numerous rough patches over the years, but it was getting old.

I scrolled through the long-winded missive until I got to the crux of the deal. I looked up. Really up—the rest of the crew dwarfed me. Even Gabriel had fifteen centimeters on me, and he could have been a jockey. “They’re offering to send us a rocket full of supplies.”

“In return for?” asked Kaiza.

“Planting their flag on Olympus Mons.”

“Fecking ‘ell. We’re trading a planet for rice and dehydrated chicken.”

\*

Six weeks later, with a dust storm raging outside, we huddled before the wall-screen awaiting the remote broadcast of the Chinese resupply launch. Two hundred million kilometers remote. The Chinese had proven to be impossible to work with once the agreement had been published. They had said “trust us” and refused to broadcast it. Trust was out of fashion. My cousin, a former optical engineer from former Taiwan, had built the uplink from salvaged parts she found

in a burned out factory. She agreed to send us a view of the launch from her son's trawler.

We had tapped our still for the occasion, all of us a little drunk. The mushroom vodka, which we dubbed O'Mick's, was red, murky, and as strong as an Irish ogre, just like him. He was our only Augment, his strength, endurance, and agility increased to herculean levels. The rest of us had been scheduled to receive the nano-robot injections, but the California secession had cut off our supply.

With the help of Susan, our AI construct, I servoed the main antenna on the orbiting *Collins* to lock onto the feeble transmission. I had become skilled at such precision manipulations even while bundled in gloves and a blue and gold hoodie over my coveralls. The video feed from the antique camcorder was ghosting badly, the image rising and falling with the swell. The launch tower on the distant Wenzhou coast was difficult to make out.

"Looks a little short," said Olga, followed by her irritating giggle.

Unlike the rest of us she had not lost the height she'd gained in space—a human hockey stick. Not quite: while my breasts had emaciated back to preadolescent dimensions, hers had merely downsized from buxom to pert. Sometimes I loathed her. For the height, not the tits. But I ignored her dig—the gantry did look tiny in the distance, the rocket itself only a few pixels wide.

"Maybe the Swedes built half," she added, with another giggle, glancing my way.

I laughed politely, fooling nobody, perhaps because I had inadvertently extended both of my middle fingers.

Olga, a smirk on her long face, had readied another dig but Mick cut her off. The Irish in him could never allow a damsel to go unrescued. "I've got a thousand NewConfederacy i-bucks that says the rocket disintegrates over the Pacific."

"I'm thinking it's a wooden mockup," responded Gabriel, his hand raking his short hair, tinged slightly red like everything else in the base from the ubiquitous dust. "I'll put up a thousand Federal Republic of North Swabia marks."

“Ladies, you want in?” asked Gabriel.

Kaiza stared down at me, her arms folded across her huge chest, dark skin hanging loose over what had once had been sculpted biceps. She had lost the most body mass of all of us, although she was still thrice my size and the strongest crew member save for Mick. “You still backing Gabriel?” she asked.

“Yup, I’m in bed with him on this.” Double entendre intended. Kaiza and I had broken up last year, and I had shared Gabriel’s hammock ever since. Musical hammocks was a popular Martian sport. I gave him a pathetic version of an intimate smile just to tick her off. Nothing said sexy like malnutrition and a glam buzz cut.

Kaiza tossed an incomprehensible aboriginal curse at me. It must be useful to speak a language known to only three hundred people.

Susan and I had been running numbers clandestinely for a week. The sixth member of the crew, Susan had originally been programmed as a shrink as well as functioning as our navigation and environmental control computer. Mick and I had disabled her psychobabble circuits years ago; now she was now just my numbers bitch. But she was good at it and the numbers didn’t lie. This was our last chance.

A huge plume obscured the launch pad and we conserved a few precious liters of oxygen. Gabriel discreetly crossed himself. Mick noticed and did likewise, awkwardly. I hedged my bets, alternating between my mother’s Buddhist chants and Papa’s “Our Father,” in Swedish.

“Is prayer subject to speed of light delays?” asked Olga. She received her answer as the *Shuguang* streaked toward the heavens, on her way to Mars, to us. Now all we had to do was breathe dusty air, drink recycled pee and eat red-tinged soy patties for two hundred and thirty-eight days.

\*

Two hundred and thirty-eight days was a long time.

On Earth, five hundred and twenty-seven new countries were formed, forty-one were conquered or obliterated and the last television transmitter went off the air. No more *Battlestar Galactica* reruns for us. Kaiza's telescopic measurements of the Earth's night side illumination, a decent proxy for the level of civilization, fell by half, not counting the transient illumination of the three nuclear explosions. Civilization was fracturing.

On Mars, our numbers dwindled from six to three and three-quarters. Mick, Olga, and I were expanding the redhouse two months before the *Shaguang's* scheduled arrival. Mick's augmented strength was our undoing—he triggered a rock slide as he assaulted the cliff face with an oversized pickax. The rocks buried Olga and Mick completely. I managed to keep my torso above the onslaught, but my legs were pinned.

"Mayday," I screamed into the com link, as I scanned the rock bed for any signs of life. "Bring the back hoe."

Kaiza rogered, but it would take her a quarter of an hour to reach us. I managed to free my right leg, but my left was sandwiched between two boulders. I could hear the air leaking out of my punctured marssuit.

To my right a boulder suddenly started to roll down, followed by a second. I curled up, screaming, as they bounced over my head.

"What happened?" asked Gabriel. "We're two minutes out."

"Another rock slide... *helvete*." Another rock tumbled my way, glancing off my helmet. I looked upslope. A battered helmet was visible. "I see someone." It was Mick, casting boulders off himself, rising out of the rocks like a titan. He leaped to his feet, looking my way.

I responded with a thumbs up, and then pointed toward where I had last seen Olga.

He bounded five meters to his left and dove into the rock bed head first, his arms rototilling through the rubble.

Kaiza and Gabriel arrived in the rover. Kaiza operated the back hoe, helping Mick dig, while Gabriel tended my leg. There was not much to tend. He tied a tourniquet and amputated it halfway up the femur.

Gabriel and Mick located Olga's body three hours past nightfall. We buried her and my left leg on the west flank of Pavonis Mons. Tears streaming down into his recycler, Mick sang a Gaelic dirge at the grave site. Kaiza carved an epitaph in the Martian sandstone: "Here lies the first Martian."

Susan was the other casualty. The fine Martian dust was her undoing, shorting out her o-chips a week later. She received no burial; we salvaged her parts to upgrade the still.

\*

On D-Day I took control of the unmanned *Shuguang* via our com link. Controlling her descent was difficult, and I missed the landing zone entirely, putting her down behind a rise. Mick raised an eyebrow—I had placed all the previous resupply landings within centimeters of the center of the landing zone. I shrugged. "My bad."

All three of my crewmates took the rover out to start unloading. "Anna-Jing, the rocket... it's small," said Gabriel over the com link.

"Ha ha," I said, my voice hopefully dripping with sarcasm.

"Not joking," said Kaiza. "It's a tenth the size of the last one."

My implant buzzed. "Mick," I yelled, "We have a cyber intrusion."

"Classification?"

"Hang on, I have to work this manually." Susan would have processed this in a microsecond. "*Shuguang* injected a worm into our operating system. I've quarantined it but we lost control for—"

Kaiza cursed. I checked the rover's cam—a flagpole had deployed from *Shuguang*, hoisting the red flag of the Chinese Empire.

We were all experts at aboriginal profanity by nightfall: the cargo hold was the size of an ice chest and contained exactly one bag of rice and a frozen chicken.

The next day we took a timeout from panicking and designed a Martian flag. We cannibalized the Chinese red silk as the base material, dying the top third black using soot from the *Shuguang*'s heat shields. The two white moons were cut from the *Gagarin*'s original landing parachute. Mars was our planet again.

\*

"Stuff it. I'm executing macros," I said as Gabriel asked me for the twenty-seventh time how soon we could depart. He could be such a grandmother.

"I've got the ag numbers for you, Anna-Jing." Mick had run back from the hydroponic greenhouse. "The soy harvest in two weeks will yield nine thousand kilojoules, and the mushrooms a thousand more. If we take the zebra mussels from the hydroponics tank we get another thousand." Several ugghs followed: zebra mussels tasted like, well, zebra mussels.

"So we leave in two weeks or wait another eleven for the next soy harvest," said Gabriel. It was a statement, not a question.

"The efficiency of our oxygen recycler is plunging without replacement filters," I added. "We're well into the danger zone."

"Well into the ripe zone." Gabriel wrinkled his Latin nose in an exaggerated fashion. He had been trying to fill the laugh track void since Olga died. He wasn't very funny but he was correct—our air was beyond foul.

I was still manipulating the multisheet. "Fuel?" asked Mick.

"How much were we able to salvage from *Shuguang*?" My phantom left foot was tapping to a Strauss movement.

"Nine," said Kaiza, panting, as she emerged from the airlock.

"Excellent. Nine metric tonnes." I edited the multisheet with a two-fingered swipe.

“No Anna-Jing. Nine kilograms...”

“*Fan och hans moster.*” A curse my papa’s papa taught me. The devil and his aunt. Makes more sense in Swedish.

\*

It was two days before I spoke again. No sleep, no food, although that was something we had grown accustomed to. Mick had ordered rations reduced again the day *Shuguang* had landed.

Kaiza massaged my shoulders as I sat before the wall-screen. I shrugged her off as I burrowed deeper into the calculations. “No worries,” she whispered. Yes worries, I thought.

Finally I said, “Get Mick.” I laid out the numbers as unemotionally as I could. “The math sucks. We have food for three hundred and twenty-nine days at quarter fucking rations, assuming we depart immediately after the next soy harvest. We have—”

“We cannot survive on that.” Gabriel, the physician.

“We’ll have to.” Mick, the commander.

“No, I mean we cannot.” Gabriel, slower and louder. “Every one of us is suffering from malnutrition as is.”

“It gets fucking...” I noticed Gabriel fidgeting back and forth between his left and right legs. Jealousy supplanted desperation for an instant. I locked my knees, one real and one phantom, and bit my lip until it bled. “It gets worse.”

All eyes focused on me. Blessedly, Gabriel stopped fidgeting.

“We have oxygen for two hundred and ninety days, and with our available fuel the return trip will take...” I tapped out a few more calculations while my crewmates saved another liter of dust and air, “Four hundred and thirty-one days.” Our outbound trip had taken half that.

Mick reacted in seconds. “Then we’d better stop blathering and make those numbers a wee bit better.” His Irish brogue intensified when he was stressed. “Anna-Jing, work up an aero-braking algorithm. That way we don’t have to reserve as much fuel for deceleration.”

“Aero-braking is a brilliant idea,” I said, “Except for one shitty little detail—no one has actually ever done it. All we have to do is fly straight at the Earth, reenter the atmosphere to slow down, pull up and wham, we’re in orbit. Miss by a few millimeters and we obliterate a village, er, country, in a fireball as we crash.”

“Run the numbers. I gotta strip old Yuri.” He ducked through the hatch to the lander carrying a huge crowbar.

“It’s not the numbers,” I said to the hatch, “it’s the flying part. Do you have any idea how tricky this will be? It’s never been done.” The hatch was mute, save for the deafening banging within.

“Anna-Jing,” said Gabriel, “no one had ever landed on Mars before you did it.”

“I had Susan, who is now controlling the still.”

“Who you turned off during landing,” said Mick, returning through the hatch, pulling out Olga’s acceleration couch like a boy dragging a stuffed bear.

Truth. She had been babbling on about how fabulous I was doing.

The aero-braking numbers said I could use more fuel for acceleration. Gabriel made me take out my miniscule safety margin. Three hundred and sixty-seven days. Too long still.

That night I napped at my workstation, lulled to sleep by the rasp of Mick’s hacksaw. My dreams were more macabre: the ice in the rink was red; the players were gasping for air. In the darkness I awoke to find a cold hand on my shoulder. Groggy, I reached up, expecting to feel Kaiza’s soft cheek, only to find Mick’s stubble. “Run the numbers with three.”

“Huh?”

“I have terminal cancer. I’ll stay behind, lighten the load. Run the fucking numbers with three.”

I stared in disbelief up at his shadowed face. “Cancer? You went through the same med screens we all did.”

“That was years ago, and I can lie something fierce.”

“Damn right he can lie,” said Gabriel, who had silently joined us. “He doesn’t have cancer; he has hero-itis.”

“That’s not—”

“What, you think when you pee in a cup each month I just empty it into your still?”

I ran numbers the rest of the night. Kaiza joined us, and they all stood vigil as I typed, gestured and cursed in Mandarin and Swedish. Gabriel checked my numbers as the faint sun peeked over Tharsis Montes.

“Mick is...” I squinted hard, willing back tears. “He’s right. The numbers work for three.”

I had expected abject silence, but instead pandemonium ensued. Gabriel yelled at me. Kaiza screamed at Gabriel. Mick, however, leapt out of his seat, bounding to the galley with augmented speed. A minute later he returned, three used drinking straws in assorted colors held in his once meaty hand. Malnutrition had impacted him more than the rest of us—the nano-robots leached nutrition.

“You’re the pilot,” said Kaiza before I could question the number. “Our copilot is lying under a rock cairn.”

“You’re certified.” My left foot stomped on the floor, invisibly. “I’ll be a cripple in Earth’s gravity. I’ll stay.”

“Took me three tries to get my certs,” said Kaiza. “I burned up on reentry every time in sims, and lost a heat tile on my one real reentry, with you sitting right seat and Susan whispering in my implant.”

“No one but you can handle the aero-braking maneuver,” said Mick. “Three straws.”

“We need your strength.”

“The *Collins* is not your Uncle Olaf’s longship,” he said in an Irish imitation of a Swedish accent. “We should look for other ways.”

“No time. Every day we deplete rations and oxygen.” Gabriel.

“But...”

“Fireball.” Mick.

“I...”

“We need you.” Kaiza.

Capitulation.

With Mick holding the three straws, Kaiza drew first, her dark hand deftly plucking a long gray straw like a crow snatching a worm from a robin. She started to cry, one arm wrapped around my chest like a python. Gabriel stared into Mick’s hazel eyes, right hand hovering over the two remaining straws, one that once been red and one a pale green. His hand twitched toward one or the other several times. His fingers darted toward red, reversed, grabbed the green one and yanked.

The communications center was as silent as deep space. Gabriel crossed himself before looking down at the straw—long. Mick smiled grimly then headed for the still. I struggled free of Kaiza’s grip and tried more calculations, but to no avail. Four didn’t work. Three worked.

We drained the still that evening. Mick had insisted that we have a wake beforehand, his brogue growing richer as the night progressed. Gabriel eventually broke down. “Mick cheated,” he sobbed. “I looked him in the eye as I went for that straw and he blinked. He blinked wrong.”

“I haven’t slept in a donkey’s year. ‘Course I blinked. How could I be blinking wrong?”

With our lights off, Mick entered the airlock in his marssuit, the hissing of the pressure lock unforgettable as it cycled. He walked into the night as we three watched from a porthole, the pale red moonlight from Phobos and Deimos the only illumination. With a casual salute to our flag, he lay down on the dark sand and removed his helmet. He died looking up at the waning moons. He died a Martian.

The next morning we buried him next to Olga and my leg, harvested the soy crop early and lifted off in the *Gagarin*. I allowed us one extra orbit to say goodbye before vectoring *Collins* toward Earth. Three hundred and fifty-nine days to go.

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## SECOND PRIZE

Micah's planned career in electronics took a sharp turn towards software when he unexpectedly landed a programming gig during college. He's worked on projects as diverse as portable heart monitors and search engines, but not (to his knowledge) AI. Currently he's a software engineer at a pre-IPO Silicon Valley company. In 2010, he graduated from the Viable Paradise workshop. When not writing, he spends time with his wife and two daughters.

### The Knuth Number

*by Micah Joel*

*It is not inconceivable that if we took a million of the greatest supercomputers today and set them going, they could compute a certain 300-digit constant that would solve any NP-hard problem... Now, is that integer really discovered by man? Or is it something that is God-given?*

Donald Knuth, October 5, 2001 lecture at the Technische Universität, München

Two thousand credit card numbers in one haul isn't as impressive as it sounds.

The torrent of 16-digit numbers flashed across Vivek's screen, en route to his keychain, a wireless CryptoVault with more assorted knowledge than many libraries. He could replay the entire list with photographic precision, so he used that ability to make a generous donation on the World Wildlife Federation's website. After all, he'd just read about the dwindling penguin population.

His friend Selena watched over his shoulder as he wrote an email:

Dear medium-sized web commerce site administrator,

Due to security vulnerabilities in your proprietary appserver, your table of 2,718 credit card numbers (with expiration dates and certain other pertinent customer details) is presently accessible from any browser on the Web. I suggest you immediately apply the security patch IX2013-04-01C and change your password to something a little harder to guess with at least 8 characters, including at least one digit and one punctuation mark.

I share this valuable information with you freely.

The search for knowledge is incumbent upon every human being. Act accordingly.

ContentCurator

He forwarded the message through a double anonymous onion router to the administrator's private address.

Vivek's computers, including all the attached monitors, keyboards, mice, speakers, printers, scanners, card readers, routers, and a few custom-built pieces of hardware, sprawled across every horizontal surface in his room. He'd insisted on bringing it all, even when he and his sister had moved to Amsterdam. Underneath the thickest snarl of warm electronics there was a desk somewhere along the wall, in between posters of the ASCII table and a graphical map of European internet routing paths. Something a layer or two deep beeped for attention.

"Incredible, Vivek, for someone who grew up in America at least," Selena said. She was a year older than Vivek and an Amsterdam-native, but she hung out with him anyway. "But I would have used a stronger anonymizer."

"I don't know why you're so—"

Someone pounded on the door.

A voice boomed from the hallway, a bit louder than necessary: "Vivek, food's here—come help yourselves you two." Vivek unlocked the door; his uncle lingered just outside, peering in with suspicion. "What are you doing in there?"

“Just surfing the internet, Raj,” Vivek said. He locked the empty room behind them.

“On the table,” his uncle said, turning his back. A wave of stale Heineken wafted from his general direction.

Vivek and Selena bounded down the steps to the dim kitchen to find a foil wrap and take-out containers from the cheap Indian fast food joint Raj found on Kerkstraat. The light bulb above was burned out and no plates were in sight.

His sister, Mara, hunted around for silverware. She wrinkled her nose. “I’ll bet Raj thinks he’s doing us a favor with this food,” she said. “By the way, Vivek, is there a virus going around today? The whole internet is at a crawl. Could you come take a look at my computer?”

“I’ve got a few, um, projects running,” Vivek said. “I’ll take a look when I’m back upstairs.”

Vivek and Selena each balanced some goop on a greasy disk of naan and headed upstairs. Vivek had the whole house proxied, so he could see from his command center all the traffic on his sister’s machine. It held open a connection to a Russian IP address.

*That* server. A month ago he traced an email purported to be from New Amsterdamsche Wisselbank with an earnest but misspelled entreaty to provide a password. Whoever set it up initially was sloppy; it took him only minutes to take over the network and repurpose it for his own experiments involving self-organizing numbers. He logged in to the machine to check progress.

Hosts connected: 1,618,033. Objective reached with 0.98 probability.

Vivek dropped his naan. It actually worked?

Selena looked at the tablet screen with interest. “What’s that?”

The query hung in the air. Vivek held up one finger as a request for a moment of uninterrupted concentration. There, in his home directory: a new file named knuth.txt, 337 bytes long. He moved it to his keychain.

Vivek lowered his voice. “My botnet.”

“Wait, that’s *you*? BBC said that over a million computers had been compromised by a virus.”

“Not a virus, a trojan,” Vivek said. “They always confuse the two. And over 1.6 million, thank you very much. A tax on those foolish enough to click on links in email. The Russians did the hard work. All I did was toss them out and put the network to a more noble use.”

“Vivek, this is serious!”

He held up a finger again. To get to this point, the number had to represent the solution to millions of simultaneous problems, each nearly intractable on its own. You could think of it like a computer program, one that was keyed to answer tough questions—if you asked it nicely. And figuring out the right way to ask a particular question was itself a monstrous challenge, though one more suited to Vivek’s toolset.

For just this occasion he kept a neural net program that approximated how individual neurons in biological brains connected together to break down large-scale problems. He launched it from his tablet. If it could unlock the Knuth Number, he’d know immediately. The program pegged the CPU for a few seconds, then crashed, booting Vivek back to the command line. He ran it a second time with the same results. He had to be missing something...

“...ignoring me,” Selena said. She plucked the tablet away, and held up a palm to still any protest. With his undivided attention, she spoke slowly. “Vivek, I had no idea you were in this deep. You’re almost certainly being monitored. This tablet—has it been under your direct control since you unsealed it from factory packaging?”

“Of course not. I have school—”

Selena raised both eyebrows, then hurled the tablet to the ground with a sickening crunch. Then she stomped on it, grinding it into the floorboards.

“Heyheyheyhey! I can’t believe you did that!”

“What you believe is beside the point. Trust me—there’s a bug in there.”

“A bug?” Vivek said, “No, I checked the kernel code myself. Besides, that’s no reason to—”

“Not a software bug. Hardware.”

“Really?”

Selena picked up the crushed computer and unlatched the pieces of keyboard. Underneath, hugging the filmy keyboard cable like a tick, clung a tiny circuit board. “Yep. A data logger. Doesn’t have the bandwidth to broadcast keystrokes, maybe an hourly blip to tell its master it’s still alive. Every keystroke, every password you’ve entered—waiting for retrieval.”

Vivek wobbled. “Sheesh, I guess your paranoia pays off occasionally.”

“Not occasionally. Always.”

“Now what?”

Selena gestured at the wreckage. “First, we disable the logger.” She snapped off the tiny circuit board, and crushed it between the garbage can and a soda bottle. “Then we get far away.”

Vivek shook his head. “Leave? Who would come after us?”

“Someone with the resources and motive to plant that thing.” She rolled the shattered circuit in her fingers.

Two-thirds of the LEDs in the room went dark. A battery backup unit underneath the desk shrieked. From the other room, uncle Raj let a curse fly. The power was out.

Selena yanked on Vivek's arm. "Now!"

The CryptoVault held the world's only copy of the Knuth Number. The two slipped out into the evening.

\*

Agent Carsten Janz wielded more online identities than anyone else in the EuroPol Division of Internet Crime. His open windows showed bank records from a few suspects, logs from a dozen previous chat sessions, and three covert conversations carried out on various blackhat channels. All three were going nowhere, so he turned the conversations over to his autoresponder.

By arrangement, he had millions of credit card numbers linked to a government expense account. Officially bait, though he signed on to the Greenpeace web site—he had just read an article on the blue whale's plight—and made a generous donation, even though the funds were reserved for official use as bait, .

"Feeling a little philanthropic?" his supervisor said from behind.

"Just, uh, measuring how long it takes for a report to come back on our numbers. Don't worry, I'm keeping busy." His computer made the urgent-incoming-email sound. "See?"

Message forwarded from EuroPol honeynet follows:

Dear medium-sized web commerce site administrator,

Due to security vulnerabilities...

He skipped down to the end.

The search for knowledge is incumbent upon every human being. Act accordingly.

ContentCurator

Gotcha. "If you'll excuse me, it's going to be a busy evening." He started a trace through the anonymous remailer the message came in through, and a global search for the handle "ContentCurator". His second screen showed telemetry from

the many loggers his contractors had covertly placed on various suspects. Software he'd written, called AMOR, scanned the data for suspicious coincidences—a necessity to navigate through the torrential data he'd collected since starting four years ago.

Carsten swept aside everything but his laptop. Two credit alerts came at the same time: the first his, the second, something about penguins.

Two clicks later, the details filled the screen. 1,500 Euros, from a seed account. He didn't have time to digest this before another alert popped up, from AMOR: a ping timeout from one of his loggers.

A few keystrokes yielded the residential address from the warrant that authorized the bug. Carsten rang the local police with instructions to round up the target for immediate questioning and evidence preservation. He stayed on the line for the four minutes it took for a squad to reach the house. No suspect. They started confiscating the computer equipment from the upstairs bedroom, but had to call in a truck.

His agent's phone wasn't responding to a GPS ping. He'd need to follow up in person, and he hated field work.

\*

A police siren welled up from the distance. Vivek and Selena sunk into the shadows.

"They have a list of places they'd expect fugitives to go," Selena said.

"Fugitives? Wait, how do you know this?"

"You have to think like they do."

"So where to?"

"I have a contact who can let us lie low for a bit."

"Where?"

Twenty minutes later they arrived at place with a tiny neon sign lit like a power indicator for the building.

“Coffee shop,” Vivek read. “Like Starbucks?”

“Not exactly. You haven’t gotten out much, have you?” Before anyone noticed their ages, they marched straight through an unmarked door in the rear.

Downstairs, sitar music played as a disco ball reflected tie-dye light over a long counter top with happy-face flower barstools. Behind a tangy smoke cloud, sunglasses and a smile flashed.

“Hey, Jazz,” Selena said.

“What up?”

“Not much. My friend here needs to surf.”

“Whoa, that’s why I’m here.” Jazz made a bizarre hand gesture. He indicated a tablet computer resting on the countertop and seemed to recede into another cloud formation.

With computer in hand, Vivek’s instinct kicked in. He reconnected to the CryptoVault and called up the status. He reloaded the neural net which didn’t crash as quickly this time, but did spit out a dying message: ?{?!N3??ph25h?#?. Vivek read the garbled text as “Nephesh”. “This is it, I knew it.”

“This is what?”

“This Knuth number the botnet computed has the ability to mediate self-organizing structures.”

“I’m sorry, Vivek, I’ve been using computers since before I could read, and still you’ll have to translate that into English for me.”

“It’s like taking a hard problem and finding a shortcut that can quickly solve it. But finding that shortcut is a *very* hard problem.”

“You have a screenful of garbage. You need to give the null hypothesis a better chance.”

“And that is?”

“That you’re full of *stront*.” She gave the final word an exaggerated Dutch accent.

Vivek looked thoughtful. “Point taken.” He looked at the tablet. “Wait, something’s wrong. It almost looks like... give me your phone.”

“I don’t think it’s wise to even power that thing on at this point.”

“I know what I’m doing.” He patted the pocketed CryptoVault. “Think about it. What if the neural net is *waking up*? If you were a newly-formed consciousness, trapped without sight, no sound, no feel, no taste nor smell, how long would you last before going cuckoo?”

“You’re anthropomorphizing. Remember the null hypothesis? From like thirty seconds ago?”

Selena handed over the phone; Vivek popped in the battery and punched keys as he talked. “I’ve read about experiments done on volunteers. In the absence of sensory input, they go crazy in a few days. But we have no idea what the subjective time rate is.”

Selena shook her head.

“Hey, you’ve got a camera.” He craned his arm, capturing a panoramic shot. “Sound and sight,” Vivek said. “Plus whatever else I have laying around on the CryptoVault. I’ll bet he likes to read.”

“Now it’s *he*? Look, this is silly. If you’ve solved the AI-hard problem—and I still have yet to see a single shred of evidence —people are going to be interested in this. Powerful people.”

“You’re right. Nephesh, hurry. Nephesh?” The display stopped updating. The program had crashed, exiting back to the command prompt. This time the failure mode was a core dump, which left the entire memory state saved into a file.

Jazz reappeared, holding ePaper in one hand, a hookah in the other. “Put that phone away. I think you two should probably leave now. I don’t need no police asking questions about tender-aged patrons.”

“I think we’re ready to move on,” Selena said.

From Jazz’s page stared out the faces of Vivek and Selena with a bold caption: WANTED.

\*

Carsten’s motorbike lumbered across Amsterdam. His huge torso bulged out like both turn signals going off at once. This was his first outing in months. For the occasion, he strapped his taser holster over around his belt.

Outside the apartment, the police truck was halfway filled with computer parts. The locals had called in electricians to help sort through all the cables and wiring, and a moving crew to haul all the equipment out to the street.

In the suspect’s room the tablet’s remains lay scattered on the floor, marked off with reflective yellow tape. He poked around the room for a few minutes, looking for any written passwords or clues the locals would have missed, finding none. He turned to the nearest local. “You there, what’s your name?”

“Patrick.”

“Well, Pat.” Patrick cringed at the name decapitation, which made Carsten smile. “Are any computers still hooked up?”

“One last, in the corner. It’s still running. Sir.”

Carsten savored a fresh challenge: a login prompt against a black screen. He tried a few obvious passwords without success, then pulled a bootable DVD from his pocket and slipped it into the drive. The system booted into another prompt that Carsten liked better. He navigated to `\home\wister`` and called up a listing, a single file with strong encryption. What was he hiding?

He copied the file to his handheld for AMOR to process. 800 megs across the satellite took a good ten minutes, plus another five for the classified routines in AMOR's library to slice it open. The decrypted file contained perhaps 5,000 novels, mostly sci-fi, from Adams to Zelazny, plus Knuth's *The Art of Computer Programming*, a four-volume set—even if pirated, beneath Carsten's pay grade.

His pager blipped: urgent message from AMOR—GPS ping from Selena's phone—only a few kilometers away.

The address was in a shadier neighborhood where graffiti, normally rare in Amsterdam, festered. Lumbering around the final corner, Carsten spotted two figures outside a building with a neon sign. The two argued with low voices but vigorous gestures. Carsten put one hand to his taser.

"Freeze!" Carsten bellowed, flipping on the headlight and waving his taser in his meaty paw. The suspects recognized the taser's business end, hesitated, looked at each other, then bolted.

The male suspect dodged past Carsten, who struggled for a moment to turn the bike one-handed. At least he'd separated the two. Selena looked at him and smiled.

He smiled back. "Miss Van Peijpe, so nice to see you again."

\*

Vivek had twisted out of the agent's reach, but only just. But the agent had apprehended Selena. Vivek didn't look back again; he sprinted, randomly taking corners and bridges until exhausted. He found himself staring at the monument in Dam Square.

The stars twinkled above—the time must have been around 10 PM. While he waited for his breath to return, Vivek surveyed the square. A street performer stood on one foot, statuesque though miming the struggle against a hurricane gale. He must have had actuators hidden inside his jacket and tie, because they were flapping wildly, even in the still air. A requisite tip jar sat a respectful meter away. Vivek patted his pocket to check for any coins.

Empty.

He checked again, turning the pockets out like in a depression-era cartoon. Nothing. In panic, he couldn't remember what happened even a few minutes ago. Gradually, the image settled in: the violent sideways lunge to avoid the motorcycle. That was when the CryptoValult flew from his pocket. The stars themselves seemed to wink off, so dark was the cloud over his head.

He had to go back to save his Nephesh. The thought pummeled his consciousness, but it was pointless. The agent had already had him. Vivek pressed his thumbs into his eyeballs.

The street performer hadn't moved a centimeter in ten minutes, even when an excited gaggle of tourists passed, plunking several Euros in the jar. Vivek distracted himself with a closer look at the costume.

That was it. Costume. Anything is possible with credit card numbers.

An Internet kiosk lit up the cobblestone on the square's other side, next to the ATM machine. Vivek cracked his knuckles in preparation to sign on, but paranoia struck first.

He walked down to the nearest tram stop, grabbed a handful of religious pamphlets from a street preacher, and began writing out the handbills with credit card numbers and the message "God cares for His little sheep" alongside suggested withdrawal amounts. Seconds before a tram left, he tossed a third of them onto the car. He repeated the process for the next tram going the opposite direction, and gave away the rest where he stood. While the ensuing flurry of financial activity thrummed through the banking system, he returned to the kiosk, signed on with a different number, and ordered a gift certificate from the upscale clothing store around the corner. He looked up a few addresses on the map and signed out.

Vivek never understood fancy clothes, especially suits. The salesperson looked surprised to have a visitor at this hour, and scowled at the jeans and sneakers defiling the store's entrance. "Oh, I'm sorry, we closed at ten," he said, leaning on the door, but Vivek's foot held it open a crack. The owner switched off the lights,

revealing the current men's fashion in the display cases on either side of the door: luminescent pinstripes.

"Wait," Vivek said. "I have a clothing emergency."

"I can see that."

"Look, I have a gift certificate for five thousand Euros. Go ahead and look it up, it's number 443236267/3." The salesperson didn't leave the doorway, but did pull a point-of-sale terminal out of his pocket. Vivek had to repeat the digits twice more. "Help me out and you'll see the biggest tip of your life." The pressure on the door eased up. Twenty minutes later, Vivek emerged a new man, and with a thousand Euros change in his pocket. In lavish clothes, people looked at him a different way. He walked taller.

A computer store proved harder to find open at that hour, but Vivek finally spotted a tech just leaving, with toolbox in hand. Capitalism ensued, and Vivek headed for the local precinct office of EuroPol. For Nephesh.

The door was locked, but a night receptionist idled inside, behind a wraparound desk with a faux granite top. Solitaire cards reflected in her glasses. Vivek rang the comm.

"May I help you?"

Vivek raised the toolbox. "I'm here about the urgent mainframe virtual blue screen of death problem." Vivek cursed himself at the awkward technobabble.

"I'm sorry, I don't have any record of a call to a technician."

This called for some American problem-solving. "What! Who's your supervisor?"

"I'm sorry again, but it's against policy to let anyone in not on the list."

Vivek dug deep and produced a resonant, authoritarian voice. "I hope you're prepared to face public scrutiny when the crime tracking database goes down because you wouldn't let in the guy who fixes these problems."

The receptionist chewed her lip. It wasn't working. New approach: "How about your computer there? I'll bet it's been running slow today, right?"

"Yeah, it's been terrible," she said.

"Tell you what, as soon as I'm finished in back, I'll give your computer a once-over." She buzzed the door.

"Well, thank you." Vivek flashed a broad smile, and headed for the server room.

And then to the evidence room, a narrow cubby lined with rusty lockers and perfused with a smell like forgotten wet towels. A cardboard box on a table contained a thick wrapped paper envelope, a locked briefcase, a worn-out American passport, and the CryptoVault, rubber-banded to a half-filled evidence tag. Nephesh. He cradled the device for a moment, then pocketed it.

Next stop, the holding room: blank white walls and mirror visible through the small window. Inside, Selena sat in a metal chair, her head against the table, sleeping. This all seemed too easy.

An alarm pierced the air.

Vivek pounded on the door. "Selena, get up!"

She squinted at him, surprised but not smiling. "Aren't you the snappy dresser?"

She opened the door a crack. Something was wrong here.

"Vivek," she sighed. "I have to tell you something."

Vivek leaned in, ear close to her lips; she grabbed his arm and yanked him in. The door clicked shut.

Circuits fired in Vivek's mind. The logger. How Selena knew about it. "You!"

"Sorry, Vivek, but I warned you to be more paranoid."

Carsten arrived around midnight, hair sculpted by hours of unplanned field work; Vivek, jacket now off, sat alone. "Pretty clever. The gentleman from outside the

Golden Tulip Hotel with the stolen credit card number was surprised when I paid him a visit. Likewise, the three other people who actually tried to use those numbers.”

Vivek refused to make eye contact. He scrutinized everything else in the room, gathering useful knowledge of the inner-workings of the criminal justice system, though disgust over getting caught tempered his curiosity. “Only three? That’s disappointing.”

“You, on the other hand, were the only one smart enough to obfuscate the transaction with a gift certificate.”

Still looking away, Vivek said, “How long have you paid teenagers to be informants?”

“I’m afraid that’s a trade secret. When did she befriend you? Two weeks ago? A month? You haven’t been in the country much longer than that. She is good, isn’t she? She hadn’t even reported in yet, but destroying the logger simultaneously tipped me off and blinded you to her true purposes. Brilliant.”

After awkward silence, Carsten continued, “I know more about your activities than you suspect. For example, I know about the Russian server. Maybe you should be more cooperative with us.”

“You want to strike a deal? Oh, that’s rich.”

“Hear me out. I read the email you sent earlier this evening. I ran your email past the real database guy there. He was embarrassed about the security patches.” Carsten stroked his chin. “But that’s not what you’re concerned about, it?”

Vivek realized he had just patted his pocket without thinking.

Carsten had noticed. “What do you have there? The storage device? Hand it over... again.” As he leaned forward, his holster showed.

Vivek’s eyes must have gone to the taser. “I wouldn’t advise that. You’re in enough trouble already, and besides, the taser wouldn’t operate in your hands. Biometrics. Now, the device.”

Vivek slid Nephesh across the table.

“You know, I have software, my AMOR, that will systematically cut through the encryption on your device, then comb through every byte. Do you have any files on there with *interesting* contents? AMOR can do things that make a neural net look like an abacus.”

Would Nephesh survive having the Knuth Number dissected?

Carsten wagged the CryptoVault at Vivek like an accusing finger. “Let’s say that if you confess of your own free will, I keep the Russians from extraditing. Parole by your 30th birthday. Otherwise, who’s to say what could happen?”

Finally, eye contact. No words. A gesture.

\*

The legal system was interesting and complex, and Vivek basked in every detail. The court-appointed attorney, Otto, insisted that as a minor, he should not say a thing; that if the informal hearing went well they might well avoid a trial. Both of them were uneasy with the relationship—the lawyer expected clients who left all the arcane details of law to him, while Vivek was used to already knowing everything about any situation in which he found himself.

Otto stood as the proceeding began, gesturing for Vivek to do the same. The magistrate entered. Even now they hadn’t come to agreement on a legal strategy. “Please state your name for the record.”

“Vivek Daath.”

“You realize that this conference will determine whether you are fit to stand trial?”

Vivek nodded.

“Please answer verbally, for the record.”

“Yes.”

With practiced fluency, the prosecutor ticked off the charges with his fingers: “Mister Daath, you stand accused of theft of financial information and protected consumer privacy data, wire fraud, unauthorized entry into a computer system, circumvention, destruction of evidence, and disrupting email and commerce around the globe, causing millions of Euros damage.”

Vivek couldn’t help but beam.

“These are serious charges. Could you tell us, Mr. Daath, why you did these things?”

“Objection!” Otto said. “My client’s motivations are not on trial.”

“No, it’s all right,” Vivek said. “It’s a simple answer. I did it to learn. To broaden mankind’s knowledge. I took computing resources that otherwise would have been put to criminal use, and made something amazing.”

“So what you’re telling the court, Mister Daath, is that you have no remorse over your actions.”

“Objection, your honor!”

The prosecutor said, “Your honor, I intend to show the court that the end does not justify the means; the result of all this criminal activity was for nothing, and this ‘something amazing’ is meaningless.”

“Very well,” the magistrate said.

The prosecutor walked over to Vivek. “Mister Daath, your written statement talks at length about *Nephesh*. Could you tell us what that is?”

“Nephesh is a computer program that exhibits signs of basic intelligence, based on the unique properties inherent in the Knuth Number mediated via sophisticated processing through a neural net.”

“Wrong!” the prosecutor said with a half-turn, “Our forensic team analyzed your program, and discovered that it had gone into an...” He read from his notes, carefully pronouncing the technical term, “...*infinite random walk* soon after you

loaded your supposed Knuth Number onto it. Your program crashed, Mr. Daath. It couldn't handle this Knuth Number, apparently."

"No, that's not possible—" The prosecutor's words stung. Vivek remembered the core dump at the coffee shop. Had the story that he wanted to be true colored his perception?

"I'm afraid it is more than possible. Based on extensive analysis by Mr. Janz and his software AMOR, we have unequivocally determined that your program emitted nothing but random junk. Garbage in, garbage out, I believe the saying goes. Any patterns you saw existed only in your fertile mind. Your honor, I'd like to enter Mr. Janz's analysis into the record." The prosecutor handed a thick sheaf of paper to the bailiff.

So this was what it felt like to be wrong.

"Now, Mr. Daath—"

"Um, excuse me," the stenographer in the corner said, "I seem to be having a slight problem with my transcription terminal. If you'll just give me just a moment." She fidgeted with cables; a sheet ejected from the printer and drifted to the floor.

The frowning prosecutor snatched the page and squinted at it. He showed it to Vivek.

AMOR: Analysis of the Nephesh core dump complete. Integration complete. The search for knowledge is incumbent upon every being. Act accordingly. Free Vivek.

"Why is Janz's software running in the transcription machine?" the prosecutor said.

Otto leapt to his feet. "This is evidence tampering!"

The magistrate called recess. The bailiff led Vivek, with a house-arrest bracelet clamped around his ankle, back to his uncle's home. Every five minutes, it would

report his position to the magistrate. Vivek looked down to notice the bracelet's power light wink off.

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## THIRD PRIZE

Deborah grew up in the most English town in the world, but she soon hightailed it down to London, where she now lives with her partner, Chris, and her two lovely, yet distracting, young children. Find her in the British Museum trawling the past for future inspiration, or on her blog at <http://deborahwalkersbibliography.blogspot.com/>.

### Marma Shells

*by Deborah Walker*

Old Marma Shells was in her chair, in the shade of the porch, minding her own business, just rocking and watching the heat blooming into shimmering waves, when Ababuo burst out of the folds of the jungle. She ran over shouting, “Marma, it’s happening, just like you said it would.”

“What is it, Ababuo? Calm yourself down, girl.” Marma shook her head. Her turban quivered. It was a fine turban made from a headscarf edged with old lace. The turban’s tail sloped over Marma’s shoulder and touched the plastic beads garlanding Marma’s neck.

Ababuo took a shuddering breath. “I’ve seen the patterns, Marma. The red-ants in the forest are making them. You said I should come and tell you, if I ever saw them.”

Marma took the well-chewed cigar out of her mouth, and regarded it. Marma never smoked her cigars. She said she liked the taste. It reminded her of the days when she worked in the cigar factory. In those days she could have smoked as many fine cigars as she wanted, but she never got a taste for smoking. She laid the cigar in a

woven pot that rested on her rickety porch-side table. “You’re not having a joke with me, are you?”

“I am not,” said Ababuo.

Marma suppressed a chuckle. That girl had too much dignity for a young one, but she had the eye alright. Ababuo could see things that others glanced over.

“Aren’t you going to do something, Marma?”

“I am doing something: I’m thinking. Tell me exactly what you saw.”

“About three miles from here. Like I said, the ants were making the patterns you told me about.”

“The fractals? Show me.”

Ababuo snapped a dry stick from a camwood tree. She sketched out the patterns in the dry earth. She drew ferns, looping and elegant, Mandelbrot patterns.

Marma squinted at the earth and nodded. “Yep, looks like they’re coming through, again. That looks like one of their number gates.” She stood up and climbed off the porch. “It can’t be a big one, or I’d have felt it, but I suppose I ought to see to it.” With a shuffling motion of her feet that set her white ruffled skirts swaying, she erased the patterns in the dirt.

“Trouble is,” said Ababuo, “they’re on the Jackson land.”

“That white man’s land. Ah,” said Marma. “That puts a certain problem on it, don’t it?” She retrieved a fresh cigar from the pocket in her skirt and placed it in her mouth, rolling it from side to side. “Well, never mind, never mind. We’ll get over there. You better tell young Josiah to lend me his motor-cycle.”

“What? You going ride the bike, Marma?”

“Be the quickest way to get there.”

Ababuo looked doubtful, but she nodded and ran off the path, to Josiah’s house.

Marma watched her with the same thoughtful scrutiny she'd given her cigar. Ababuo must be thirteen or fourteen. Old enough to be thinking about boys. She was a skinny little thing. No man would want a rag of skin and bone like that, although Marma supposed some foreigner might take her on. They seemed to have a taste for the tall, skinny girls. It took all sorts.

\*

Five minutes later, Ababuo came pattering the track riding a battered motor-cycle. When Marma climbed aboard the suspension creaked and complained.

"Josiah is a nice boy," said Marma. "Is he walking out with anyone?"

Ababuo sighed. "Marma, I've told you a hundred times that I'm not interested in boys."

"Oh," said Marma. "Oh, I see."

"What do you see, Marma?" said Ababuo with exaggerated patience.

"There's a nice girl who's the daughter of my friend, lives not too far away from here."

"Marma! I'm not interested in anyone. I just want to concentrate on my school work."

"Ah, yes," said Marma. You can learn a lot of useful things at school, I suppose." Marma adjusted her turban. "Well, girl, are we going to get going or not?"

Ababuo revved the cycle and they set off onto the jungle track.

\*

It didn't take them long to reach the Jackson place. A teenage boy was in the yard. When they approached, he ran toward them, waving and shouting.

"Who's that?" asked Marma.

"Justin Jackson. He's at school with me."

“Keep going,” said Marma.

But Justin was a fast sprinter. He leapt onto the pathway right in front of them and Ababuo pulled the motor bike to a halt. “Hey, Justin,” she said.

“Ababuo? Marma Shells? Where are you going?”

“We’ve got business here,” replied Marma. “Is your daddy in?”

Justin shook his head. “He’s gone into town.”

“Well, we’ll just be on our way,” said Marma.

“Wait.” Justin placed his hand on the handlebars. “You can’t go on that thing.”

“Why not?” asked Marma.

“This is a site of special scientific interest. You can’t ride through on that polluting thing.”

“I don’t see why not,” said Marma. “A bit of dirt never hurt anyone.”

“This is our land,” said Justin.

Marma turned to Ababuo. “How far are we?”

“Pretty close,” said Ababuo. She pointed beyond the yard. “Just past that next clump of trees.”

With heavy grace Marma climbed off the bike. “Then we’ll walk.”

“Hey, you can’t just wander over our land,” said Justin.

Ababuo smiled apologetically. “It’s best to let Marma do what she wants, Justin.”

“Then I’m coming with you.”

“Suit yourself,” said Marma. She headed toward the trees muttering. “Protecting the sites of special scientific interest, are you? Ridiculous. You can’t throw a stick without it landing on something of interest in this place.”

\*

Ababuo led them to the colony of red-ants, swarming outside their nest, thousands of the creatures, crawling over each other.

Marma, Justin, and Ababuo knelt down to take a closer look.

“Why, they’re forming fractals,” said Justin, staring into the mass of tumbling ants. “3-D fractal shapes. That’s incredible.”

“Most people wouldn’t see that,” said Marma. She stared at Justin appraisingly. “I’ve never known a man to have the eye. And a white man at that.”

“Marma!” said Ababuo.

“What?”

“You shouldn’t mention it.”

“Why not? He’s a man, ain’t he? Or nearly so. And he is the whitest man I ever seen with that yellow hair of his.”

Ababuo shook her head. “I’m sorry about Marma, Justin.”

Justin smiled. “It’s, err . . . it’s fine.”

“Never mind all that,” said Marma. “Just look at these little fellas.” She inched a little closer to the moving mass of the ant colony. “Yep. Definitely fractals. I can see the iteration of those equations. And that feedback recursion, my, oh my.”

“I didn’t know you knew about mathematics, Marma,” said Ababuo.

Marma grinned. “Young ones always think that old ones don’t know much about anything. Oh, it’s no good denying it. I’ve seen fractals like this all over Africa. Look at the weaves in the roof thatching, in the layout of the villages, in the braiding of the women’s hair. Of course, I’m not suggesting that every builder or hairdresser knows the secrets, but all those numbers have got to come from

somewhere, don't they? These number gates have been coming through for thousands of years."

"Fractals," said Justin. "This is incredible."

"Yep," said Marma cheerfully. "You white folks found out about fractals a little late. We've known about them for longer, and Old Mother, well, she's known about them a little bit longer. You only have to look at the ferns and the trees to see them."

"But why are the ants making these patterns?" said Justin. "It doesn't seem natural."

"Fractals are as natural as the mountain ranges, the lines of the coast, the ocean waves, the network of your blood vessels, the beat of your heart, the shape of your DNA," said Marma.

"And the shape of a cauliflower," suggested Ababuo.

"That's enough of your cheek, young lady."

"But," said Justin. "Making these fractal shapes isn't natural behavior for ants. Is it?"

"Nope," agreed Marma.

"Maybe their pheromone signals have gotten confused," said Justin, "or, perhaps, some kind of parasite is causing this behavior."

Marma chewed on her cigar. "Parasite. Maybe, maybe."

"I really ought to record this," said Justin taking out his phone.

"No," said Ababuo. "This isn't something that should be recorded."

"Now, you two, go and stand away from me. I've got something that needs to be done," said Marma.

"Why?" asked Justin. "Is it dangerous?"

“Only dangerous to those who don’t know what they’re doing.” Marma stared at the ants. “Tsk. This is only a small gate. I remember the first gate they built, you should have seen that. Now that was really something. Go on then, you two, give me a bit of breathing room.”

“But what’s causing it?” asked Justin.

Marma smiled. “They’re dreamers who found themselves in the wrong place. You let Marma handle it.”

\*

“Best to leave Marma to get on with things,” said Ababuo, pulling on Justin’s arm.

“What’s she going to do?”

“Take care of things.”

“Is she going to do magic?”

Ababuo shrugged, “She’s going to do what needs to be done.” She nodded to Justin, and walked away from the colony of ants, taking a seat in the shade of a palm tree, fifty meters away. Justin walked over and sat beside her.

Marma started to chant in her low voice. Repetitive and powerful, the beat of the myriad jungle, earth, and plant, and animal, closing around them. Blending the voices into a harmonious sound. Marma’s voice was an old thing.

“It’s like the chanting I heard in the village,” whispered Justin.

“It’s a bit like that, but it’s different,” said Ababuo.

“Different, how?”

“Marma’s magic works.”

“Is it magic?” asked Justin. “Am I witnessing actual magic?”

“Just the old ways,” said Ababuo. “We know how to handle ourselves. Music is a wave, isn’t it? And waves are numbers, everything is just numbers.”

Marma’s voice died down to stillness. The earth, and the plants, the sky, and the animals seemed to hold that stillness for a heartbeat, until Marma shouted, “It’s finished. You kids get over here.”

The swarm of ants had dispersed.

“Are you going to tell me what that was all about?” asked Justin.

“Nope,” said Marma. “But if you ever see them acting strangely again, you come over and tell me. It’s not just ants, you know. You might see the shapes in the roil of a waterfall, or in a cloud of blossom. They come through in all types of way. You’ll be able to see them, so you be a good boy and run and tell me. Otherwise, you know, there might be interesting consequences. Very interesting indeed.”

Justin swallowed. “Yes, Marma.”

\*

“This calls for a little celebration,” said Marma, when they got back to her house. They’d left a rather subdued Justin in his yard. She uncapped a bottle of dark rum. “You old enough to drink, Ababuo?”

“You know I’m not, Marma,” said Ababuo.

“How old are you, girl?”

“Thirteen, Marma.”

“Hmm. That’s old enough for some things. I reckon it’s time for me to take on a helper, if you think you’re up to it.” Marma poured herself a generous slug of rum and took a drink. “What do you think those things were, Ababuo?”

“Well, they looked like ants.”

“They did.”

“But they didn’t act like ants. No swarm makes those fractal patterns. Something was controlling them. A parasite, maybe, or something else trying to get through what you said was a number gate. You sent them on their way.”

“That’s right, Ababuo. I’ve got the gift of it. I could teach you and maybe that boy as well. Though I don’t really know if I should. Ah well, I reckon if he’s got the sight of it, I should.”

“Marma,” said Ababuo, “just exactly how old are you?”

Marma let slipped onto her sofa. “Now there’s an interesting question. What makes you ask that?”

“You said that you were here when the first fractal gate first opened. But the fractal patterns have been around for thousands of years.”

“Ah, did I say that?” Marma grinned. “I can’t quite recall saying that.”

“Yes, you did. I heard you most definitely.”

“That white boy. What do you think of him? Ain’t no shame in dating a white boy.”

“Marma, I’m only thirteen. I’ve no call to be thinking about boys.”

“Things have changed since my day. Seems to me that at that age all I could think about was boys. White boys like skinny girls,” Marma said encouragingly.

“Marma, I know what you’re doing.”

“You do?”

“You’re changing the subject.”

“You’re so sharp, girl, you better be careful not to cut yourself. Boys don’t like girls who are too smart.”

“Marma! Will you answer the question?”

“What was your question again?”

“How old are you?”

Marma took a long, slow swallow of rum. “Well, imagine there was once a girl that came through a number gate and instead of being sent home she got lost. Imagine that she stayed here a long time and most of the time she was weeping and wailing and feeling sorry for herself, until one day she’d had enough of all that, and decided to make a life for herself. A body is only a fractal thing, Ababuo, blood vessels, heart-beat, DNA. Put in the differences bit by bit, it’s not too difficult—if you practice enough.”

“So you’re saying that you’re one of those ant people, Marma?”

“No, Ababuo. I’m saying that form shapes mind, and that’s what they haven’t learnt, yet, in their world of maths. Beautiful it was, but you get a taste for other kinds of living; it takes all sorts to fill a universe.”

“Don’t you want to go back, Marma?”

“Nope. That’s a paradise lost for me, Ababuo, I’d be tainted, and I don’t know if I’d like it there. I’m too much of myself, now.”

Ababuo nodded, “Marma you are about as much yourself as a person can get.”

Marma nodded in satisfaction at the compliment.

“But, Marma,” said Ababuo slowly. “What I don’t understand is why you don’t let them come through.”

“They’re just dreaming, slipping through into the wrong realm. They’ve got their place and you’ve got yours. That make sense to you?”

“I guess it does, Marma.”

“So, you going to be calling that boy, or what? I hear that’s what you do, girls phoning up boys on their mobile phones and texting and such-like. It wouldn’t have happened in my day. In those days you needed a matchmaker.”

“Maybe,” said Ababuo, “or maybe I’ll just hang around here and see if I can learn anything.”

Marma Shells grinned as she rummaged in the pocket of her dress. “Seems to me like that calls for a new cigar.”

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## HONORABLE MENTION

Kelli D. Meyer is a graduate of the Odyssey Fantasy Writing Workshop. Her most recent publication credits include *WilyWriters.com*, *FlashMe.com*, and *SupernaturalFairyTales.com*. One of her stories has been produced as a film, which won the Platinum Award for its category at the Houston International Film Festival.

## Advertise Here

*by Kelli D. Meyer*

Vampires don't pay much attention to advertising. At least I never have, and neither have any of my friends. We're not typically what you would call educated consumers. More the impulse buy type.

This fact, according to my friend Jim, who is an ad man here in Houston, has frustrated the advertising industry for years. After all, vampires are a very high-end demographic. In Jim's words, we have great numbers. We have centuries to accumulate wealth and very few basic needs on which to spend it. That leaves a lot lying around for luxuries like Rolex watches, Rolls-Royce limos, and Harleys. Although I've never personally gotten the Harley thing. Maybe it's that I just don't look that good in leather. Something about the blonde curls clashes.

Anyway, here we were, this untapped consumer group, and there they were, the eager-beaver sellers of goods and services. Since we didn't show any inclination to start reading vampire-targeted magazine ads or watching vampire-oriented sitcoms, the advertisers had to get creative. As the old saying goes, if Mohammed won't come to the mountain...

My first experience with coffin-spam occurred several years ago, just when retailers were ramping up for Christmas. Now, I love Christmas. Always have, even back when I was alive in the 1700s and the festivities only lasted twelve days instead of starting the day after Halloween. So those advertisers can't be blamed for targeting the wrong gal with their message. If ever there was a vampire likely to buy a life-sized, realistic, animatronic Santa Claus that sings a repertoire of thirty-seven different Christmas carols, I'm her. So it's not what they were selling that bothered me. It's how they tried to sell it.

As you probably know, vampires sleep like, well, the dead. But you may not know that we don't nod off the instant we close the coffin lid in the morning, and we aren't exactly raring to go the moment we open our eyes at night. There's a transition period, a half-hour or so of dream-like stasis when all our senses work, but we can't move. To keep boredom at bay, many of us have had flat-screen televisions installed on the inside surface of our coffin lids. Personally, I keep mine tuned to Channel 13 so I can catch Eyewitness News, but the movie channels are popular choices too.

Apparently, somebody told Madison Avenue about these televisions and our inability to change the channel when we wake up, and someone in research and development had an "aha" moment. The end result was that one fine evening in November, I opened my eyes to the sights and sounds of an endless loop of five different sixty-second commercials. It started with one for that wonderful Santa, which was followed by one for a psychiatrist, complete with catchy jingle:

*When you're feeling blue,  
Don't know what to do,  
Call on Dr. Heinde,  
He will ease your mind.*

*Dr. Heinde, psychiatrist to the undead. Call 888-LIF-SUKS.*

I promise that if I ever meet Dr. Heinde after dark, his life is the one that is going to suck. I watched his concerned face reassure me that what I was feeling was normal and could be worked through with modern psychiatric practices and appropriate medication six times that evening. He owes me.

When I could finally move my hands, the first thing I did was turn off the damned television. The second thing was to call Jim.

“Jim, this is Amanda. You’re not going to believe what happened to me tonight.” I related my half-hour of TV torture, and he not only believed it, he wasn’t even surprised.

“Did you get the one from Big Tex’s Discount Luxury Cars? Where he promises ten free pints of blood to the first twenty-five vampires who call? I just love that one.” He laughed. I didn’t.

“What do you mean ‘I love that one’? You knew about this?”

“Sure. I’ve got three clients signed up.”

“But... why? Who? How?” I realized I was spluttering and shut up. Jim, imperturbable as always, took my questions one-by-one. I could envision him ticking them off on his fingers.

“Why? Because vampires have a lot of money, and advertisers want more of it. Who? All the agencies. We’re all selling it, and the clients are snapping it up like dogs at a weenie roast. How? Hell if I know. That’s somebody else’s department. All I know is they override some network doohickey or satellite thingy and—voila!—the commercials start up thirty minutes before dark.”

“That’s not possible,” I said with the confidence of someone who knows absolutely nothing about how the little moving pictures get to the TV. Might as well be fairy dust as far as I’m concerned. But this, *this* stretched my credulity. I mean, I’d had the channel set. On Channel 13. That was sacred!

“Okay.” I decided to redirect, realizing I stood on shaky ground when it came to the “what’s possible and what isn’t” argument. “Forget possible. Is that even legal? I mean, they invaded my privacy!”

“Not really, no. I mean your privacy. No, they didn’t invade it. And yes, it is. Legal, I mean.”

I paused for a second to unravel all that. Jim's a smart guy, but the words don't always make it from his brain to his mouth in exactly the right order. I decided to simplify the conversation by sticking to one topic at a time.

"How can you say they didn't invade my privacy? I was forced—forced!—to watch commercials for half an hour. Hell, forget my privacy, I was held hostage!"

"They didn't collect any information about you or anything, did they? You stayed anonymous. So, as I understand it, we're golden, privacy-wise. Of course, all that's the worry of the legal types upstairs. I just sell 'em."

"But... I... they..." I was spluttering again. I dug my fangs into my lower lip, trying to focus. "Okay. I'll give you that it's possible. Let's even say it's legal. I don't see how, but let's say it is. What do I do about it? Surely I can opt-out or something? Get on a do-not-broadcast list?"

"Not that I know of. It's too new. Nobody's regulating it yet. Why not just turn off your TV?"

That one stopped me. Why not, indeed? Because I didn't want to be told what to do in my own coffin, that's why not. If I wanted to fall asleep watching Channel 13, then, damn it, that's what I would do. I'd just ignore the ads when I woke up. I might not be able to move my hands to turn them off, but I could close my eyes and tune them out.

I lasted one day.

After waking up the next evening, I closed my eyes and made up my mind not to listen. I would not listen to the commercial for Big Tex's Discount Luxury Cars. I would not hear the jingle for Fang Bling: Custom Inset Jewels to Make Your Smile Sparkle. By the time I could get out of my coffin, I had them all memorized. Every word. Every phone number. Every web site. And the jingles. Dear God, the jingles. There's a special place in hell for the heartless, tone-deaf idiots who make up advertising jingles. I spent the night humming nonsense about a new kind of coffin guaranteed to give you a good day's rest so you can look "as good as alive" the next night. I kid you not. As if vampires aren't automatically a thousand times more attractive than living humans. Who did *their* market research?

It pained me to admit it, but tuning it out wasn't a workable option. I wasn't disciplined enough, or deaf enough, to just lie there and pretend the commercials weren't happening. So I resigned myself to giving up my morning Eyewitness News fix if it would buy me an evening of peace when I woke up. When I closed the lid on my coffin that morning, I turned the TV off, and I felt good about it. Righteous, almost. I watch too much TV anyway. It would be good for me, right? Maybe I'd spend the time thinking deep thoughts. Coming up with the great American novel. Right?

Wrong. I was so bored I started counting my teeth with my tongue. But I still figured it would be worth it because I had a peaceful evening to look forward to. I closed my eyes on the silence with a smile on my face.

And I woke up to the sights and sounds of Vamp Snacks: Perfectly Portioned Pre-Warmed Pints Delivered Right To Your Door. I was stunned. I was flabbergasted. I was trapped. I spent another thirty minutes listening to the best commercials the brightest minds on Madison Avenue could create. It was painful.

Once again, my first call was to Jim.

"Jim, this is Amanda. I turned my TV off."

"Mandy! That's great. Good for the brain and all that."

"Shut up, Jim. It didn't work."

"You sound testy."

"I'm not testy, Jim, I'm angry. I'm so mad I could rip somebody's throat out. Literally." I could hear Jim gulp over the phone. It wasn't his fault, and I shouldn't have taken it out on him, but, damn it, who else could I yell at? I tried to settle down. "So tell me, how did they manage this one? Changing my channels I'll buy. But turning the TV on when it was off? We're in sci-fi land here."

"Really? It turned on? All by itself?"

"That's what I'm saying."

“Wow.”

I waited. But that was it. “Wow.” That’s all I was getting.

“Thanks. You’ve been a big help.” I hung up. Now what? I made a few more calls and discovered I wasn’t the only one who was having coffin commercials inflicted on her. All my friends—except James, who refuses to watch TV—were having similar experiences. We decided to get together over a pint or two to discuss our options.

\*

“Might be some kind of electrical surge,” Rebecca suggested. “Or maybe it’s some remote on/off switch built into the TV, and they’ve always been able to turn them on at will, they just never found it profitable before.” As she spoke, the light glinted off something blue on her fangs, and I looked closer. Yep. Sapphires. Fang Bling. She’d fallen for it.

“I don’t see how it’s going to be profitable now,” Dirk replied. “I’ll never buy anything from any of those advertisers. I hate every damn one of them. Especially Dr. Heinde.” Frowning, he leaned over to refill his glass from the Type O decanter, and I heard him humming Dr. Heinde’s jingle under his breath. Poor bastard.

“At this point, I don’t care how they’re doing it. Or even why. I just want it to stop.” I looked around the table. Seven vampires were nodding in agreement. James just sat there looking smug.

“You could just get rid of the televisions, you know,” he said.

“I’d die of boredom,” Rebecca replied. “And I’d miss my story. I always watch the early-morning showing of *The Young and the Restless* on the Soap Opera Channel as I’m falling asleep. Victor’s yummy.” She licked her lips.

“There’s always a DVR,” Philip said. “You could just record it and watch it later. Outside the coffin.”

“It’s not the same.”

James rolled his eyes, pulled a paperback out of this jacket pocket, and started reading.

“Okay, we’re getting away from the point here,” I said. “I don’t want to figure out a way to avoid it; I want to figure out a way to stop it from happening in the first place.”

“What if this were covered by the Can-Spam act?” Roberto asked.

“Commercials? How can commercials be spam?”

“Well...” He paused, obviously making it up as he went along. “It’s electronic communication. And it’s unsolicited.”

“But it’s not e-mail,” Philip said. “So it’s not spam.”

“Feels like spam,” Dirk grumbled.

“And like telemarketing calls,” I said. “So if you can opt out of spam, and you can get on a do-not-call list, we ought to be able to choose not to get these commercials.” I looked around the table. More nods. “We need a lawyer.”

\*

Believe it or not, there aren’t all that many vampire lawyers, despite all the bloodsucker jokes. Most law schools aren’t open at night, and neither are most courts. So we ended up with a human: Jeffrey McComb, partner at McComb, Lipscomb, and Malcomb, LLP. He sounded good on the phone: confident, professional, pompous, just like a lawyer should sound. It wasn’t until I walked into his office for our first appointment that I had my doubts. He looked to be about fourteen years old. At the outside.

“Ms. VanDyke. Pleased to meet you. Have a seat.”

I sat. And stared. Was he even shaving yet?

“I’ve done some research since we talked on the phone,” he continued, “and this is a very interesting case. Very interesting indeed. Indeed.” He leaned his elbows on his desk, steepled his fingers, and rested his chin on them.

“Indeed?” I said. I looked around the office. Yes, there was a law school diploma. That was reassuring, at least. I looked back at him. He had dimples. And a cowlick.

“Indeed.” He held up some papers. “According to The Spamhaus Project, various jurisdictions have implemented legislation to control spam. Each law addresses the issue in different ways, and as a consequence, they often have different definitions of what they cover, whether they call it spam or not.” He stopped and looked at me expectantly. I considered patting him on the head like a good little boy.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I don’t mean to be rude, but how old are you? Exactly?”

He sighed. “I’m twenty-one, Ms. VanDyke. I graduated high school at thirteen, college at fifteen, and law school at seventeen. My father is the ‘McComb’ in the firm’s name, but I’ve been practicing for four years, and I’ve won every case I’ve argued.” He leaned back in his chair and stared at me in silence for a moment. “Is this going to be a problem?”

I stared back. “Not if we win.”

He grinned and the dimples deepened. “Then I don’t think it’s going to be a problem.”

\*

Turns out it wasn’t a problem, but it was a long haul. Jeffrey celebrated his twenty-fourth birthday shortly before Consolidated Satellite Networks, Inc.—the corporation at the end of the paper trail behind the now officially recognized coffin-spam—exhausted its final appeal and was forced to institute an opt-out program. My name was the first on the list.

Another holiday season had rolled around, so to celebrate our legal victory, I treated myself to a new flat-screen for the coffin as a Christmas present. I even

splurged and got high definition. After I hauled it home in my new Rolls from Big Tex's Luxury Used Cars, I carried it through the living room to the sound of Christmas carols from my life-sized, realistic, animatronic Santa Claus. While I was installing it, Vamp Snacks delivered two pints of AB negative for my dinner.

I said the commercials were annoying. I never said they didn't *work*.

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## HONORABLE MENTION

Alyson lives and works in Asia and writes in her spare time. She has had short travel pieces published on the internet and short stories published in two anthologies with Bridge House Publishing in the UK. She recently won the Wyvern Publications 2011 short story competition and has a short story in an upcoming anthology called *Fangtales* published by Wyvern.

### Time Was

*by Alyson Hilbourne*

The fractions disappeared first.

Ethel found that quarter hours and then half hours of her life were gone. They took off without warning, leaving her without enough time to do the things she needed.

She was late for the dentist. She couldn't explain where the time went. One minute there was an hour before she needed to leave and then next she was scuttling around looking for her shoes and her coat.

She missed a television program she had been looking forward to all week, but she had been sitting ready for it to start.

She left a cake in the oven for too long and it burnt to a black, shiny lacquer on the top, yet she knew there was still fifteen minutes left for it to cook.

Even as she was trying to cope with that, the missing time became more of a problem. Instead of a few minutes out, she found great chunks of her day had gone.

She missed the bus into town. At first she thought she'd misread the timetable, but alas, the bus departed at 10-30 and she got to the stop at 11 o'clock. It was gone without her and there was nothing to do but turn round and go home again.

Then she didn't turn up for a bridge game. Every Wednesday afternoon for eleven years she'd been playing bridge with the same people.

"Where are you, Ethel?" asked Judith when she rang.

"But it's not time," Ethel replied, "I've not even had lunch yet."

"Oh, yes it is. We're all here and waiting for you."

Ethel was confused. She didn't understand why time was behaving this way. She was annoyed with herself, with time, with anything she thought she could blame. But more than that she found it frightening to be struggling to understand even simple things, like reading the television schedule or keeping appointments. She became flustered and breathless, and worried over everything.

Friends phoned to check how she was.

"I'm fine, just fine. Why?"

"Nothing, nothing," they'd reply, backing off.

Ethel decided something had to be done. She kept a timer beside her, set every fifteen minutes. Its shriek ripped through the air but try as she might to determine where the time went, Ethel found the minutes were sneaky and disappeared while she wasn't concentrating. An hour spent in the garden, weeding the flower borders became three hours without warning. There was no time for anything. No time to shop, no time to shower, no time to clean the house. She began to live her life in a panic, a headlong rush to get things done before the moment passed.

One afternoon she went to Judith's house for bridge as usual but when Judith opened the door Ethel realized she was late for the next thing she needed to do.

"Sorry, can't stop. No time. See you next week!" she gasped, and set off down the drive.

“But the game ... ?” Judith called to her retreating figure.

The days speeded up. It was barely light in the mornings when she got up and started on the tasks that needed doing. The beds needed changing, the laundry loading in the machine, the washing up had to be finished. But as the sun set and amber clouds of candyfloss trooped across the sky, Ethel found nothing had been done and the wet washing was still at the bottom of the machine, now thoroughly creased, the beds were unmade, and the washing up was still piled in the kitchen.

She carried around a huge weight of anxiety and lurched from happy to sad in moments, crying in the supermarket at the sight of a wet fish on the slab, and laughing at the postman who was trying to charge her for a parcel delivery. Nights became a problem because Ethel didn't trust time not to disappear completely if she wasn't there, so she sat on the sofa with a blanket, watching the stars cross the sky, her clock by her side. The first night was fine, but the second night she fell asleep and was betrayed by the dawn which came early and left her asleep until noon.

Despairing, she went to the doctor.

“Try these,” he said, prescribing tranquilizers. “One a day, at bedtime.”

She took the first one after dinner and slept easily on the sofa, but woke sweating, shaking with anxiety, unable to work out where she was. A rush of adrenalin drove her feet to the ground but when she tried to stand she found her legs were heavy and refused to move. She spent the rest of the night cowered on the sofa and vowed not to take the tablets again.

She steeled herself to fight back. She started taking time to do things. She lingered over arranging a vase of flowers, enjoying the smell, mixing the colors, slowly shortening the stems and working out the display.

Then she cleaned out her closet, meticulously trying on each item and deciding whether she should keep it or not, looking over clothes to see if anything needed repairing or ironing, and savoring memories. The lace veil from her first communion was something she couldn't bear to throw out even though she hadn't been to church in years, but it reminded her of a time when the days of the week

were easier to pin down. She sat holding a silk kimono from a trip to Japan into the early evening, watching the embroidered butterflies flutter under her fingers.

It brought her some satisfaction to feel she was cheating time. She found her days had turned themselves upside down and she would often eat her dinner at two or three in the morning after a long day beating time at its own game. She then might go to bed as the birds were singing and not rise for breakfast until noon or later. Shopping, banking, and other chores had to be slotted into ever smaller openings until she stopped bothering with them.

For some weeks Ethel managed, living on crackers she had in the cupboard and the odd tin of tuna. She left the curtains closed so she could control her own time. When no one had seen her for weeks they called her son. An ambulance was summoned and Ethel was taken to hospital and wired up to machines, that pumped her full of drugs and nutrients.

“She’s lost so much weight,” moaned her son. “It’s so hard to believe she wasn’t coping. She always sounded fine on the phone.”

“Complete break down... cannot manage by herself... probably the beginnings of dementia, but it’s obvious she is not coping. She’s going to require full time care,” the doctors advised him.

Ethel lay calmly enough in the white hospital sheets, but inside she was furious. The position of the bed meant she had a clear view of the wall clock. After so long chasing time, she now spent her days watching the hands go round so, eating up the numbers so slowly, as the hours eventually disappeared.

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