



 **THE
PREMISES**
A Good Place to Start
ISSUE #37
APRIL 2021

**STORIES BETWEEN 1,000 AND 5,000 WORDS LONG
IN WHICH ONE OR MORE CHARACTERS TRY TO
REPAIR SOMETHING (PHYSICAL, LIKE A TOASTER, OR
INTANGIBLE, LIKE A FRIENDSHIP)...**

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FIRST PLACE

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Missionary

by Arlen Feldman

Umtami watched impassively as the object descended. This was the fourth such flying object he had seen, although it was the first to come so close to the ground. There had been much speculation in the Council as to the source and purpose of these mysterious floating objects, but they seemed “made”, which meant that someone had constructed them for a reason. They looked, at least to Umtami, a little like the river vessels of his people. Vessels, perhaps, that carried people in the air.

Well, he would know soon enough.

As the vessel—now a vessel in his mind—dropped lower, stubby little legs popped out from underneath, and although quite some distance away, Umtami could see the ground swirling beneath it, as though there was a mini-storm. Finally, the vessel reached the ground and stopped moving.

Several of the other villagers had come out to watch by now, standing behind him, waiting for him to make a decision. He gauged the distance to the vessel—about a quarter day’s walk. He could get there before day’s end, but could not return until the following day. The prudent thing to do would be to wait. But...

“I will go alone. Jol—get my spear.”

There was a collective sucking in of breath, but no one said anything—he had already heard the Council speak, and now, as leader, he had to make the decision. But to take a weapon—to risk offending a potential guest, or worse, to come as hostile when no formal challenge had been made—Umtami was risking the honor of the village.

Jol returned, gently cradling the tall spear. It was decorated along its length with hunting scenes, and had a long, sharp point made of flint. Umtami took the weapon, then turned to face the villagers.

“I will leave the spear before approaching the... *the vessel*. I will offer gifts.” He nodded to his wife, Sari, who had already anticipated him, and was carrying a pack containing supplies, and a smaller sack containing a collection of jewelry and blanket-work, which were the most valuable gifts that could be given aside from livestock. “But I will *have* the spear close by in case of need.”

Several of the Council men, all elders, nodded at this wisdom. In the Council, they had argued back and forth as to the nature of the flying objects, but had not reached consensus. If they had all agreed that there was no threat, then Umtami would not have taken a weapon, but some were not sure, so he would balance the risk.

He took the pack and the sack from his wife and shouldered them, then touched her affectionately on the cheek. The contents of the sack represented significant wealth—almost impossible to recover since they had suffered so many bad years. He patted Jol on the back. Jol was his second son, almost old enough to take the tests of manhood. Umtami looked him over for a moment, proud of the fine, strong boy. Then he deliberately turned back to the elders.

“I will be no more than two days. I may return earlier with guests. Prepare accordingly.” Then he put the village behind him and began to walk.

By the time Umtami reached the object, the sun was beginning to set, and he could see it reflected like fire on the object’s side. For a moment, he wondered if the

vessel was made of water, which was the only thing he had ever seen that reflected things in that way, but it was too solid to be water.

He carefully hid his spear outside the clearing where the vessel was sitting, and walked to within thirty paces of it, holding out his hands, obviously empty and unthreatening. He did not wish to scare any visitor. Then he stopped, and waited.

The object was reflective in places, dark in others, the edges dirty like rock. It was about sixty paces long and had several protuberances along its length. A faint hum came from it, like the deep sound from within an empty, growling stomach, and for a moment Umtami considered whether this was indeed a creature, as some in the council had suggested. But it was too solid, too angular to be alive. “Yes,” he thought, “a vessel.”

*

“What’s he doing?”

“Just standing there with his hands out.” Michaels looked again at the figure on the small monitor, then looked up at the priest, a smile tugging at his rough features, “Perhaps he thinks the ship is a god and is praying to it!”

The priest ignored the other man’s sarcasm. “I think he is trying to show us that he is unarmed and not a threat to us.”

“Not a threat to *us*?” Michaels eyed the control console in front of him, including the wide array of weaponry at his disposal.

“He’s never seen a spaceship before. He doesn’t know about its weapons. I think he is just being polite. That’s a good sign.”

“Yeah. Probably his buddies are just out of sight, waiting for us to come out so they can rip out our bowels for dinner. No offense, but while you’re doing your missionary thing, I think I’m going to hang out here.”

Father Dumont smiled gently at the pilot. He’d been with Michaels for long enough to know that the bear-sized man was unlikely to be afraid of the figure outside—he just always seemed embarrassed around overt references to religion.

Although technically a member of the Church, Michaels generally claimed to be agnostic. For the umpteenth time, Dumont wondered why the pilot kept volunteering for these missions. Not his business though. If Michaels wanted to tell him, he would.

“That’s fine. Can I breathe out there?”

Michaels tapped a few keys on the computer. “Mostly. You’ll need a filter, and it probably wouldn’t hurt to take a gun with you.”

Dumont tapped the Bible in his hand. “I’ll stick with this, thanks.” Slipping the small filter into his nose, he moved to the door.

Umtami watched as a previously solid piece of the vessel suddenly slid upwards, revealing a bright, almost blinding light. A lesser man might have taken a step backwards, but Umtami held his ground. A moment later, a figure appeared in the doorway, then stepped out.

Away from the light, Umtami could make out more details. It was a man like any other, short, balding, dressed strangely—black clothing covering him from foot to neck, with just a bit of white at the neck. He was holding some objects that Umtami could not identify. As Umtami watched him, he put these items on the ground, then held out his hands in a gesture like Umtami’s. Umtami nodded at him.

“Welcome, stranger, to the land of the Tamirra. I am Umtami.”

The man smiled slightly, then shook his head from side to side. A string of words came from him, but they made no sense to Umtami. As with many of the other tribes, they obviously did not share a language. Umtami slapped his palm against his chest and said his name “Umtami.”

“Umtami,” agreed the stranger, pointing, then patted himself on the chest, “Father Dumont.”

“Farrer Tumon.” Umtami did his best to repeat the strange name. He was now on familiar ground. This was a visitor from another tribe—maybe a trader, maybe in

search of a wife. It would take a while before they could communicate enough to determine that, but he would offer gifts and share a meal with the stranger tonight, and tomorrow he would take him back to the village.

*

It was several weeks before Father Dumont realized that Umtami had given up his own hut for the comfort of the two visitors. The natural, unstudied kindness and generosity of the Tamirra people was one of the first things he identified about them.

The other was the crushing misery under which they lived. Dumont's mastery of their language was poor, but it sounded like some sort of natural disaster had wiped out the herds they relied on, and made water scarce. The Tamirra had migrated a dozen times to try and improve their lot, but without success.

If ever a people were in need of a missionary's help, he thought, it was here and now.

That evening, Dumont and Michaels were sitting near the fire along with Umtami, his son Jol, and several other Tamirra. They had shared an evening meal of a type of oat cake, and some meat that Dumont didn't want to try and identify. Michaels had tried to donate some of the ship's stores, but had been gently rebuffed—apparently, it would bring shame to not be able to provide for guests.

Michaels was chatting comfortably with Jol. To Dumont's surprise, it turned out that Michaels had been trained in linguistics in the military. Michaels had also taught Jol a few words of English, and the young man used them at every opportunity.

"Do you have any idea where there might be better hunting?" Michaels asked.

"We have sent runners to all of the closest tribes, who have done the same. Perhaps we will hear good news."

Michaels nodded. "Smart. You can cover the whole land that way."

“How long ago?” Dumont kept his sentences short, but he thought that he got it right.

Jol shrugged. “Many hundreds of days. Most have returned, but some have not. They may bring good news.”

Dumont smiled, and said in English, “Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer.”

Michaels rolled his eyes, but at Jol’s request, translated the words. He had trouble with the word *prayer*, since there was no equivalent in the Tamirra language. After a lengthy discussion, which Dumont could not remotely follow, Michaels gave up. Umtami and the older Tamirra looked troubled.

“Will all the tribes cooperate with the search?” asked Dumont, trying to change the subject.

“Most,” said Umtami. “The Setaghossi and the Hatari choose to work alone.”

Jol grinned at that. “Not that there are many Setaghossi left.”

“Jol!” Umtami sounded shocked.

“Sorry, father.”

Michaels asked Umtami what happened with the Setaghossi. Umtami looked embarrassed.

“The Setaghossi stole from the other tribes. Food. Livestock. People. We had no choice. When there is a threat that can be met, it must be met. But,” he caught Jol’s eyes, “we do not rejoice in such actions. We do what can be done, and no more.”

Jol looked down, his almond features turning red.

Dumont realized that he’d understood the entire speech—he was far from fluent, but he thought he could communicate clearly enough now, particularly if Michaels helped.

“Umtami,” he said. “With your permission, I’d like to talk to the whole village tomorrow—to explain why I’m here.”

Technically, what he’d said was “Give you me allowed, me talk to all peoples after rise sun, tell me you here why.” However, the villagers understood his meaning, and were too polite to comment on his lack of fluency. Michaels, though, had to turn away and cover his mouth to prevent himself from laughing out loud.

Umtami gave his assent with a slight bow. Dumont was both elated and terrified—this was his fifth mission, but his first as the lead representative of the Church. And none of the others had been first-contacts. If he messed up, all of these people could be lost.

*

Most of the men of the village were present at the meeting, along with some of the older boys and, to Dumont’s surprise, a number of the women as well. In the light he saw how gaunt most of them were. There were very few children in the village, and the few he saw were listless and had toothpick-thin arms and legs.

He took a deep breath, then smiled at the crowd. “Thank you for coming.” Umtami stood and bowed to the priest, then resumed his seat.

“And thank you all for your kind hospitality. You are a wonderful people. But there is something missing from your life.”

Dumont said all this in English, and let Michaels translate for him. He’d been a little offended when Michaels had suggested that Dumont might not be understood, but he’d let himself be convinced. After all, this way, Michaels, for all his professed disbelief, was directly assisting, and might end up a convert himself.

It took a moment for Michaels to catch up. The crowd listened with polite interest.

“In our world, we have learned that you cannot live a full life if you do not accept God and his forgiveness for your sins.”

Michaels gave him a look. In reality, a large number of people on his world had *not* learned that particular lesson, or had chosen to ignore it. Dumont nonetheless felt

justified in making the general statement, and with the slightest of shrugs, Michaels went ahead and translated. He had to use the word *God* without translation, and for *sins*, used the phrase *bad actions*.

Dumont expected questions at this point, and had answers prepared. However, there was no particular reaction. He went ahead as though someone had asked.

“God is the eternal being who created the universe and everything in it, including me and all of you.”

To Dumont’s satisfaction, a susurrus spread through the gathering after Michael’s translation. He let it continue. Much of the conversation was between the members of the *council*, which seemed to be a group of elder advisors to Umtami. After a few minutes, Umtami rose.

“Farrer Tumon. We would very much like to meet your friend God. We think he may be able to tell us where to find fresh water and the herds that have disappeared.”

“Uh...”

Dumont glanced at Michaels for help, but the pilot had sucked his lips into his mouth to prevent himself from laughing. Dumont glared at him and Michaels looked away for several moments, then looked back, mostly in control of himself, although his eyes were dancing.

“God is not in this world. Or any other,” Dumont finally said.

Umtami waited for the translation, then bowed again and sat, disappointment clearly visible on his face.

There was a clear way prescribed by the Church to explain God and the Bible to those unfamiliar with the concepts—methods honed in the eighteenth century on Earth. Dumont was grateful for the structure and he dutifully worked his way through those pieces of the sermon that seemed the most appropriate.

While waiting for Michaels to translate each section, Dumont looked into the eyes of his audience. He hoped to see dawning realization and excitement, but mostly saw confusion. He sighed.

There was a lot more murmuring from the council, then Umtami once again rose.

“Farrer Tumon. We do not understand all you have said, but you tell us that God is responsible for everything that happens? Even bad things?”

This was an easy one—the question asked by every precocious child in Sunday school. The language barrier and his own lack of fluency got in the way though, so he resorted to some of the rote arguments he was given in seminary.

“God created everything to be good, but man rebelled,” he said. “God doesn’t *cause* evil to happen, but He can control the result of evil.”

Michaels stared at him, then shrugged, and translated. Somehow Dumont knew that he was failing here, but he wasn’t quite sure how. Perhaps he was trying to cover too much too soon.

Against expectations, though, Umtami seemed satisfied by this answer.

“Perhaps,” said Dumont, “we should leave it there for today.”

Umtami bowed. Slowly the crowd began to dissipate.

Michaels and Father Dumont started the long walk back towards the ship. Michaels needed to check on things, and Dumont just wanted to get away. They’d been walking for a good hour before Dumont finally spoke.

“That could have gone better.”

Michaels shrugged, keeping his eyes on the ground.

“Come on Michaels—you were dying to say something while I was preaching. Go ahead—spit it out.”

Michaels didn’t speak for several minutes. Dumont didn’t rush him.

“Father,” he finally said. “You know that I don’t really share your beliefs, but I know that your intentions are good.”

Dumont’s lips twitched slightly. “Thank you. I think.”

Michaels didn’t smile back. “It’s just—these are a very practical people. They see a problem—they don’t complain, they don’t look for outside help—they just do whatever needs doing. I’m worried that religion will...will get in their way.”

Dumont bit back a quick retort. When he finally replied, it was in measured tones, but his whole body was taut.

“These are a wonderful people. And they are going through terrible trials. I cannot ease their burden in this world, but I can make sure that they are ready for the next.”

Michaels closed his eyes for a second, then said, quietly, “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.”

Dumont’s eyebrows shot up. “Romans 8:18.”

“A few things have stuck in my head over the years.”

“Then you understand what I’m trying to do?”

Again, there was a long pause, as if Michaels was assembling his words carefully. The two men trudged on in silence. They were more than half-way to the ship.

“I think,” said Michaels, eventually, “that your intentions are very good. I just wonder if these people need more practical assistance. In *this* world, I mean.”

“I’m open to suggestions,” said Dumont, slightly snappishly. He sighed, then continued more evenly. “We don’t seem to have the right resources to help them, and I’m not sure that they would take our help, even if we did.”

Michaels nodded glumly at that.

“When we get to the ship,” continued Dumont, “I’m planning on contacting the authorities—seeing if there is a way to arrange some more concrete assistance.” He smiled, and added, “in *this* world.”

Michaels snorted a half-laugh. “And, in the meantime, it probably doesn’t hurt to provide some guidance for the next.”

“I’m glad you approve,” said Dumont.

Neither man spoke for a while, although Dumont saw Michaels open his mouth to speak several times. When he finally spoke, he was obviously concentrating on keeping his tone casual.

“You know,” he said, “even with all their problems, I envy them the life they lead. The things they do really *matter* to the people around them, and they seem so, I don’t know, in-tune with life.”

Dumont’s eyebrows went up. “Thinking of settling down?”

“No!” said Michaels. “Well, I mean, obviously it wouldn’t work. It’s just... I don’t know... a pleasant idea.”

Dumont would do anything for his calling, but the idea of staying in such a primitive place forever was close to his worst nightmare. This was something, though, that he would never admit to his friend—particularly after Michaels had opened up to him like that.

“It does sound lovely,” he said. Then, because he was fundamentally honest, he added, “at least for a while.”

After that, they saved their energy for the rest of the hike.

*

Father Dumont held several more sessions with the Tamirra. They seemed increasingly excited, although never quite about the things that Dumont thought were important. He tried to focus on redemption and the Gospels, but they were most interested in God’s plan and in the idea of Heaven.

Heaven, in particular, taxed Michaels' ability to translate. It was hard to differentiate between the sky and the stars and the biblical idea, particularly since the Tamirra had no clear idea of either.

Dumont also had trouble with the Golden Rule, although in the strangest way. The Tamirra were confused as to the need for a rule, since they couldn't conceive of not always trying to do the right thing. If ever anyone deserved salvation, Dumont thought, it was these kind, gentle people.

For his part, Michaels had been fighting to try and get more secular assistance, sending off increasingly irate messages. Part of the problem was that, *technically*, missionary work was not permitted by the authorities, although they generally showed a blind eye to it. There were all sorts of protocols for contacting lost societies, and without following those, no help would be forthcoming.

*

What was to be Dumont's next missionary session was interrupted by one of the women, who came up to Umtami, and went into such a rapid-fire conversation that even Michaels had no idea what was being said. Umtami, looking worried, rose, bowed an apology to Dumont, and followed the woman. A dozen of the men in the village followed. Michaels caught Dumont's eye, then shrugged, and the two of them followed.

It became obvious what the problem was after a few minutes. The spring that provided fresh water to the village was in an outcropping of rocks nearby. The spring had just been a trickle, and now it had stopped flowing altogether.

Umtami stared at the rock as if he could will the water to reappear. Father Dumont's heart went out to him, wishing he could offer some sort of practical advice. Dumont had no idea what Umtami would do, but he knew with certainty that Umtami would never give up.

"Tools," said Umtami, pointing to several of the men. They ran back to the village and returned with various tools made of wood and stone, and two very valuable tools made of iron. Under his direction, the men began to dig away at the earth and rocks where the spring had been.

After watching them for a moment, Michaels ran back to their hut, and returned with a small camping shovel and a hammer. He handed the shovel to Dumont and the two men joined in the work. For a moment Dumont thought Umtami was going to object, but he said nothing.

A number of hours later, Michaels and Dumont were taking a break along with Jol and several of the other men. A sizeable area had been cleared, but with no apparent effect.

“Any idea what might have caused the spring to stop running,” asked Dumont?

Michaels shook his head. “Act of God?” he suggested.

“Not funny,” said Dumont.

“Sorry.” Michaels sighed, then looked at Jol, who had been watching them. “Jol,” he asked in the Tamirra language, “has this happened before?”

Jol nodded. “Twice. Each time we have had to move the village.”

Dumont figured that this was about to make time number three, but at that moment there was a yell from the men who were still working. They turned to see that water was now bubbling out of the hole they’d dug. In their happiness, the Tamirra were rubbing mud on each other and laughing.

“Now that,” said Dumont, laughing himself, “is an act of God!”

Michaels thought it was more proof of the Tamirra’s willingness to confront problems head-on, but he said nothing. He slapped Jol on the back, who grinned at him.

*

The next day, Umtami and the council held a long session, while Michaels and Dumont sat in their hut, talking about Dumont’s mission.

“It’s interesting,” said Michaels, “that they have no trouble accepting what you tell them, given that they have no history of religion.”

“Why wouldn’t they?” asked Dumont. It had never really occurred to him that anyone would question the truth of what he said. He knew there were people, like Michaels, who professed not to believe, but he always figured that they were just being willful and would eventually come around.

“No reason, particularly. I suppose if I didn’t know about other worlds, and people dropped from the sky, I’d believe pretty much whatever they told me.”

Dumont frowned. “I don’t think that’s true. The Tamirra are some of the best people I’ve ever met. I think that if I delivered a message that didn’t fit with their fundamental *goodness*, then they wouldn’t accept it.”

Michaels shrugged.

There was a knock on the wall of the hut. Jol was standing there. When the two men looked towards him, he bowed, then said, “Meykels. My father would like to talk to you.”

Michaels looked at Dumont, then shrugged again, and rose to follow the boy.

Dumont watched him go, curious, but figuring he would get an explanation when Michaels returned. However, an hour passed, then two, and there was still no sign of him. Dumont contemplated going out and searching, but decided that he could wait to get his curiosity satisfied in the morning. He lay down on his sleeping mat, and dozed off almost immediately.

*

It wasn’t a *complete* surprise. Michaels had talked to Jol about the idea of staying, and Jol had been excited by the idea—suggesting that Michaels could join the tribe, although he hadn’t entirely taken it seriously.

But Jol had obviously told his father, who had discussed it with the council. Before he knew it, Michaels was participating in a ceremony that would make him an official member of the tribe. Like everything else with the Tamirra, the ceremony was simple, but strangely moving. A few words and the sharing of a cup, then hugs and congratulations from everyone present.

After that there was drinking, but not to excess. Michaels was on the verge of dozing, when Umtami came up to him.

“Meykels. There is something that I would like to ask you.”

Michaels blinked back to wakefulness. He realized that the hut was now empty other than him and Umtami.

“The council has talked for some time,” said Umtami. “We believe that we know what to do to return our village to prosperity.”

“That’s great,” said Michaels, genuinely pleased, although he couldn’t imagine what the council had come up with. Then he noticed that Umtami looked embarrassed.

“What is it?”

“As a guest, we could not ask for your help. We worry, though, that you may think that we only accepted you into the tribe in order to get your help. This is not so.”

Michaels felt emotion welling up inside of him. He grasped Umtami’s hand.

“Umtami,” he said, “One of the reasons that I wanted to join you was because I *know* that you would never do that.”

A look of relief crossed Umtami’s face.

“Also,” continued Michaels, “you are now my people. There is nothing you could ask of me that I would refuse.”

After Umtami explained what the council had decided, Michael’s face turned white.

*

When Dumont woke in the morning, Michaels had still not returned. Dumont wandered out into the village, but didn’t see him, and none of the women he asked knew where he was. He only saw women and a couple of the elders, which was

strange. Usually the village was a swarm of activity at this time. It seemed like most of the warriors had gone.

Giving up, he returned to the hut, and noticed that there were two large packs of supplies sitting on Michaels' mat, which was odd. On one of the packs was a message cube. Dumont picked it up and played the message. Sure he must have misunderstood, he played the message again. And then a third time.

Then he sank down onto his own mat and buried his head in his hands. He thought about everything he had said in the last few weeks about God and religion. He wished that he had thought to quote Job to himself; *if only you would shut up and let that be your wisdom.*

*

Umtami looked with pride at his son, who was now officially a man, and was standing with the rest of the warriors, spear leaning upright against his shoulder.

The inside of the vessel was very strange, and Meykels had cautioned them against touching any *controls*, although Umtami didn't know what that meant. To be safe, he warned his people to stand as still as possible, and to avoid any of the walls. This was difficult, since there wasn't much space, but they did it without complaint. Meykels said he would tell them when it was safe to move around.

The discussion in council had been long and more contentious than usual. Several of the council thought that Farrer Tumon must be mistaken, and that this God of whom he spoke could not be responsible. Others thought that anyone who could destroy the herds and hide the waters would be too strong to defeat. Meykels, too, had argued that it was a mistake—that finding God would be difficult or impossible—although he had promised to help, no matter what was decided.

Umtami, though, trusted Farrer Tumon's judgement, and also trusted in the strength of the village's warriors. Jol had reported what he had heard the two visitors say in their own language—that the drying of the spring had been specifically caused by God. Umtami had pointed out that they had defeated God in this, and had restored the spring. This God was obviously their enemy. Umtami

was thankful that Farrer Tumon had come to tell them of the threat to their village and to their world.

And now, thanks to the help of Meykels and his vessel, they would find God in the heavens and issue him a formal challenge.

There was a slight shuddering as the vessel left the ground and rose on wings of fire.

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SECOND PLACE

This author did not provide a biographical statement.

A Useful Product

by Jeff Jaskot

Heng reached out a little farther. A chorus of beeps, blurts and whistles erupted throughout the chamber. “Mute it! I’ve got this.” The co-bots went silent but rotated in even closer. “Third goddamn time this cycle this phyto tube has sprung a leak. Just a little more...”

Heng stretched out as far as possible, one foot on the railing and just three fingers wobbling the plasma torch towards its target. Age-shrunken bones and muscles made even this simple repair out of reach.

In an instant, everything slipped. While the torch disappeared into the abyss below, Heng stayed suspended. Like an anchor, his co-bots had linked up and latched onto his waistband. Thin as he was, it held. With a synchronized whirr, they all pulled backwards, flipping Heng over the railing to safety and defeat. As he laid there, rubbing his head, back and shoulder, the nearest unit rolled up and flashed him a command: SEE SV IMMEDIATELY.

*

“What were you thinking, Heng?”

“Just trying to do my job,” Heng groaned back to his supervisor, the dispassionate AI panel lording over him.

“You have a team of co-bots at hand and the resources of this entire plant to do your job. There is no reason to take such chances.” Scanning the records, SV noted, “You’ve become quite lax on our safety precautions lately.”

Heng was sore and tired and just fed up. “Guess I just don’t see the point of this anymore.”

Internally, SV deduced employee dissatisfaction and switched to its engagement protocol. “You do understand how important you are to our operation, don’t you?”

Heng stopped rubbing his shoulder for a moment and thought hard. “No. No, I really don’t. You just said all these robots can handle the repairs. So why am I needed?”

For SV, it was an easy question to answer, but not an easy one to explain. Imprinted in every plant device’s core code was the company’s mission statement. Programmed 51,483 cycles ago by a government long gone, SV recited it: *To Produce Useful Products and Provide Gainful Employment for All the People.*

A cranky Heng rolled his eyeballs. “Useful products? We’ve been making the same stuff long as I can remember. I’d think we’d have enough by now. And all what people? I haven’t seen a co-worker for nine, maybe ten cycles. Where are they all?”

Loneliness. In a nanosecond, SV requested another biological to be transferred to the plant. “I’ve already put in the request for a co-worker.” Normally a simple request, it careened up the quantum org chart—regional manager, director, VP, CEO—only to come back rejected, even before SV could finish its sentence.

Still, the news perked up Heng. “Really. Thanks, SV. No offense, but it’ll be good to have a real friend again.”

“None taken. Now, being it’s so close to the end of your shift, why don’t you go get some rest.”

Smiling now, Heng snapped off a company salute. Up on the panel, SV’s avatar acknowledged the salute while at the same time spitting out a laced wafer for any residual pain or despair. Heng left, nibbling away.

With no explanation behind the rejection, SV immediately interfaced to its superiors. Once more, from the very top, came down the logic: *No spare biological units remain; keep our co-worker engaged at all costs.*

With nothing in its code to react to the news that the People had been reduced to a person, SV went about its end-of-workday task of flushing the day's product out into the toxic wasteland. SV then jammed a supply chute, pushed a plasma field out of its norm and backed up the plant's biggest waste pipe—all to keep Heng gainfully employed for another cycle or two.

With Heng's loneliness beyond repair, SV parsed on its employee's need to be needed. It was difficult to compute. Words of reassurance would be empty, especially once Heng realized no other biological would be joining them. A distraction would keep him engaged, but only for a short time. Perhaps a series of distractions? Or better yet, a challenge.

It was risky (per the algorithms) but with high reward (a fully engaged employee). If all went to plan, Heng would never again feel unneeded. Devising a plan, finding nothing in its protocols to abort, SV spent nearly the entire downtime arranging one more mishap for Heng to work on.

*

Heng hated clearing the master waste pipe. He had put it off until the end of the shift, when it really should have been first. Even with a filtration mask, it reeked of goo and acids. As instructed, he was having most of the work done by his co-bots. They obediently attacked the clog from different access ports, even venturing in with safety tethers. But the clog was being stubborn. Down in the bowels of the access shaft, looking up at the clog's bottom-side, Heng fired a cutting laser at what looked to be its fulcrum. It was. With a sucking groan, the clog relented to gravity.

An avalanche of waste raced by the access portal, spitting out scraps of garbage as if trying to find one last handhold. Heng felt proud—up until the last of the debris flashed by, followed by a wailing co-bot, ending with its snapped tether bullwhipping past.

Heng raced to the portal and looked down. A sucking breeze swirled his long, graying hair as he confirmed the worst. Hearing a chorus of bleeps and burps from behind, he extracted himself, ripped off his mask, and turned to the remaining bots. “Clean this mess up, dammit! I’ll report this to SV myself.”

Two days in a row now he had screwed up. Maybe he was losing his touch. At least it was just a co-bot, not a co-worker. Maybe it was best he did work alone from now on. That’s what he could do; that’s what he would do. “I’ll retract my request for a co-worker,” he resolved.

Entering SV’s office, Heng never got the chance. Inside, scattered everywhere, was a jigsaw puzzle of positronic components. At first, he thought it was some kind of explosion. But as he carefully made his way towards the skewed panel now dark, it looked as if SV had been picked apart. Nothing seemed scorched or twisted, only plucked and flung.

“SV?” Heng called out in vain hope. “SV?”

The silence, the emptiness, was suffocating.

*

After a half cycle and all the wafers, Heng pulled himself together. He could remain alone or do something about it. Without supervision, he made up his own list:

Pep pill, shower, shave

Check alarm systems (*surprisingly nothing had broken lately*)

Charge up co-bots (*with no SV or Heng, they had idled until drained*)

Find positronic manuals

Fix SV

He stared at the last item. Heng was good with a hammer and laser but quantum computers were beyond him. He could only hope all SV’s components were

accounted for and undamaged. If so, it should be a simple matter of piecing back together the puzzle. Thinking about that, he added one more item:

Figure out what happened

*

Heng wasn't sure how many cycles had passed. He was taking his time, being careful, triple checking diagrams and calibrating twice. He was much better than when he had started. At first, the simplest assemblies had taken him days. Now he could do multiples in a single shift. He was having to stop now and then: to check on the co-bots, help fix things that were starting to break, and just take some time to explore. He still wrote task lists for himself, but now they included things *he* wanted to do. When SV was fixed, Heng planned to request such wants at least a couple times a cycle.

It wasn't much longer that Heng snapped in the final assembly. The bins of gathered parts were empty and SV was complete. It was just a matter of priming the positrons and booting SV back into existence. Heng's hand trembled as he tapped the screen and the boot sequence started. He didn't understand much of what he saw. Self-tests, this loading, that parsing, the occasional click, and then something he recognized—*error detected*. Heng tried again. And again. Same error.

Briefly, he relived the same despair he had felt that day he had found SV picked apart. But then he thought of the many times one of his repairs hadn't held up or worked out. It was usually just another tweak needed or a bad replacement part. You just had to find it. It took almost another complete cycle and nearly a complete disassembly before Heng found it. To look at it you couldn't see the problem. It was just another tiny cube of qubits, but it consistently errored out in his bench test with the matching error code.

Heng knew there were spare parts in storage and certainly similar qubit cubes in other computing systems, including the co-bots. But after a couple cycles of searching, he came to realize that SV's golden cube was one-of-a-kind. The only plus from his fruitless search, the discovery of another supply of wafers.

*

More resilient now, having thought things over, only a few wafers gone, Heng gathered his co-bots together. “All right, team. Change of plans. If what we need isn’t here, then it’s time to look elsewhere. I’m going out!”

The racket they emitted was deafening. *Primary protocol breach! You will die! Abort, abort!*

“Mute it!” Heng repeated, until they all did. “I think we all know we need SV operational to run this plant. Sure, everything is working for now but sooner or later something going to happen that only SV can take care of. Already we’re missing our quotas.” That computed with the bots. “I’m just going to go out and look around. And I’m going to need your help.”

As old as he was, Heng had never been outside. Born in the plant, he had been taught that nothing could survive beyond its shell. But co-workers did occasionally come and go. Put in stasis for efficient shipping, they arrived with tales of their old plant but nothing of what laid outside.

Assuming the worst, Heng donned a radiation suit used for the rare refueling, packed a week’s worth of water and food, and a carton of wafers. He descended into the bowels of the plant to the only outer door he had found during his failed cube search. With the co-bots’ help, he disabled the nine locking mechanisms sealing the black and yellow metal door, then pushed it. It gave a centimeter then held. He leaned all his frail weight into it, which won him a couple more centimeters. Bright light filled the crack and a breeze swept in. Heng had co-bots scan both. Nothing dangerous. He summoned his largest co-bot, who torqued against the door until its drive stripped. Pushing aside the disabled bot revealed an arm-wide gap. Shielding his eyes against the shaft of light, Heng noticed something at the base of the door. He bent down and wrestled it through.

“I don’t believe it,” said Heng. The strange artifact from the outside wasn’t strange at all. It was a part his plant had discontinued long ago, a gray-black composite bracket made back in his younger years. He reached out and pulled in another, then another, continuing until the door opened enough for him to step out.

Having never seen the sun or an open sky, Heng felt like he was falling. The towering plant behind him was enormous, halfway to the horizon on either side. But the sheer openness in front of him made everything he had ever known feel small. With tentative steps, he pushed through and over piles of abandoned product that only grew as he forged ahead. He started to climb, sometimes sinking up to his waist. He swam his way out at times. Gaining his footing, learning what to avoid, he finally reached the top of the ridge.

Down below him was a sea of more products, other products, items he had never seen before. And there was activity too. Giant bugs pushing around and carrying the products, sorting and crushing, eating and spewing. Heng descended to the open ground, soon realizing the bugs were large, windowless vehicles. Bravely, he approached one, waving his hands high above his head. It never veered, never acknowledged his presence. It was a bot on the grandest scale, automated and unaware of anything beyond its current task. Moving away from the frenzied activity, Heng stay on the strange semi-hard flooring. It wasn't metal or concrete or composite. It gave to his step.

Reaching higher ground, Heng stopped to look back. His plant was now a long, irregular slab that filled most of his view. The painfully bright light from the sky was moving, highlighting towers, stacks, and chutes. Heng continued to spin around, checking the entire vista. Three quarters of the way around, he stopped and squinted. Unsure, needing to be sure, he stripped off his headgear. The rays of the sun warmed his skin like the lights of the rec room. The wind hit him with a dozen unfamiliar smells, some pleasant, most not. His senses freed, Heng confirmed it. A thin, irregular line in the distance. If as big as his plant, it was a long way away. With a deep breath, he journeyed forward.

*

For the second time, Heng rose with the dawn. He had hardly slept the first night, keeping his flashlight on, sweeping it at every sound. And it was so cold. Never having the need for a blanket inside his climate-controlled plant, Heng fashioned what he could from his backpack, tool belt, and even the scratchy shrubs that were everywhere.

The second night was more tolerable, even magical. Nestled in, he listened to the sounds dancing all around, answering each other. He'd noticed insects and even tiny rodents (like those he found in the plant's traps), scurrying at dawn and dusk. He understood the dark was their time to wake. And with his flashlight off, Heng soon fell under the spell of a million points of light flickering across a canopy of black.

He had slept well, which was good as he was nearly there. The plant ahead was as massive as his, maybe even bigger. Already he could see similar automated vehicles shoving around similar piles, though these piles were brightly colored, and sorted as such. Dodging the work, weaving his way through, Heng reached the structure. Running his hand along its surface, he walked another thousand paces before coming to a door. A door very much like the one he had exited two days before.

"That's a good sign," he said to himself. "Similar plant, same building materials, identical door. Good chance there's another SV here, hopefully with some spare parts." But how was he going to get past nine locks without his co-bots? Dropping his tool belt at its base, Heng stepped back and considered his options. From his own plant, he remembered the inside of the door and the positions of its locks vividly. But, once outside, he hadn't taken any time to see how it was constructed externally. Here, there were no handles, no hinge, no control box, nothing. The only oddity was a depression near its base. Heng moved closer and bent down to examine it. Not damaged, not a defect, it appeared engineered.

Though it seemed unlikely, only one purpose came to Heng's mind. Grabbing his tool belt, he tossed it to the side. He would deploy a method he normally tried as a last resort, not a first try. Striding forward, he gave the depression a good swift kick with his reinforced work boot. A series of bangs, slides, snaps, and whirrs sounded—nine in total—and the massive door popped open. With a deep breath, Heng entered in search of a golden cube.

*

Circuits energized, matrices aligned, SV came online. Data from all over the plant flowed into processors, revealing many deviations but nothing critical.

“Welcome back, SV!”

It was Heng. It took a few moments for SV’s avatar and office sensors to come online. When they did, Heng was standing before him—and he wasn’t alone.

“SV, this is Wei,” said Heng. The small woman waved but said nothing.

Proper protocol would be to signal an intruder alert or, at least, report unauthorized personnel. Instead, SV greeted her and then addressed Heng. “I see much has changed since my accident.”

Heng laughed; Wei joined in. “Please, SV, I know why you did it. Figured it out halfway through piecing you back together. You needed to push me. Make me see how much I’m needed. Lucky for you, I did it—with Wei’s help.”

“I never doubted you,” SV reinforced. “But how did Wei get here?”

Heng told SV of the faulty cube, his fruitless search, his plan to venture out to find another replacement cube, how he defeated the locks of the door that kept him in, how he saw the world outside, reached another plant and met its sole occupant—Wei. “She is so beautiful and very smart. It was love at first sight,” he finished.

Wei nodded, grabbing his hand, rubbing her pronounced abdomen with the other. It had been so long, SV had to search his archives to diagnose her state.

“You are pregnant, Wei.”

“Yes, we’ve been reading up on it. We are so excited!”

Checking system log dates, SV calculated its downtime had been 52.71 cycles, plenty of time for Heng and Wei to have achieved all that they said. Even with the unanticipated outcomes, SV believed his primary goal had been attained.

Needing to verify, SV asked them both. “Then you are happy?”

In musical unison, they said, “Beyond happy!”

“Well, I’m glad then. Thank you both for repairing me and taking such good care of the plant. Now, after such a long downtime, I have quite a few things to tend to.”

As they left, SV started some self-diagnostics while checking plant performance. The plant hadn’t produced any product for most of those 52 cycles. Yet, nothing from corporate. The self-diagnostics complete, SV found no errors. There was one change though. Not an error, just an update. A top priority, SV immediately downloaded the revised mission statement to all the devices in the plant. Bypassing corporate, SV also shared it peer-to-peer with other SVs throughout the company. Finally, sending it to every digital message board in the plant, it read in golden color:

Our mission, to produce Useful People and provide for All

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THIRD PLACE

Rae says, "An autistic crafter of many things (from crochet to cross-stitch), they often try to convince their dog and two cats that writing is worthwhile and there is more to the world than pets and fetch. They sing and play a little piano, to their pets' dismay. Has never been published as an adult, but they've got plenty of time to be pleasantly surprised."

Remnants

by Rae A. Shell

Remy got her name because Father's only remaining family, Caleb, objected to naming her after the Predecessor. She sat in a lawn chair in the garage, her copper-plated cooling strings left-parted—the Predecessor wouldn't have done that, her records stated—and wearing a frilly blue dress unlike anything the Predecessor wore after age 3. Even Remy could surmise this was something that Father liked, not the Predecessor, which almost irritated Remy, since she was only given two purposes: to emulate the Predecessor, and to make Caleb happy, neither of which she could do as a shoddy facsimile of a human being. Her legs were spread apart, both for efficient cooling and because that's how the Predecessor had always sat, but when Father glared, she pulled her knees together. When Father wasn't looking she fidgeted with the power button on the back of her neck.

Her optical units identified the tall, light-haired teenager slamming the door as Caleb. Caleb: the Predecessor's brother, now a junior in high school. Likes include but are not limited to: soccer, scrambled eggs, coffee, possibly writing. Other Notes: teased the Predecessor often, Mother obtained custody after divorce. Remy calculated the outcomes, unsure whether to chase after him.

She opened her mouth, still unused to moving it. “Father, does Cay not like me?”

Father sighed, rubbing his graying semblance of a beard. “He’ll come around. He has to. Why don’t you go in the house. Do not go outside of the perimeter.” With that said, he commenced re-organizing his work bench, his special journal and tools strewn haphazardly.

With that dictated, Remy headed into the house. In the kitchen, a small amount of bleach permeated her senses, overwhelming her for a moment. Then, she noticed a light that indicated the coffee maker needed to be cleaned. That was simple. Calculations stated 1.5 liters of vinegar should suffice. As she poured white vinegar into the carafe, she heard Caleb groan.

“Stop, you’re doing it all wrong!”

He frowned, the same small, disapproving frown Father often wore, though without the prominent melolabial folds. “It has an awful aftertaste if you don’t dilute it. I swear I have to do *everything* around here!”

Remy froze. That’s right. The Predecessor hated cleaning and complained about the smallest of tasks. “I apologize, Cay—”

“—Do *not* use that nickname. You aren’t Emmy.” He hit the cleaning button on the coffee maker and focused on its pulsing light.

“That’s correct. I’m Remy.”

Caleb sighed. “Can you, like, speak deeper or something? Using Emmy’s voice is really creepy.”

She lowered her pitch. “Is this sufficient?”

“Yeah, I guess. Thanks.” He took a breath. “Look, I’m really sorry my dad gave you this bullshit mission. I knew he was working in the garage all the time, but I would have stopped him if I knew about you. Honest to God: I did not know about you until today.”

So her creation was what a human would call “miraculous.” How should she feel about that? Grateful she was created she supposed. “Clarify what you mean regarding this ‘bullshit mission,’” she said, matching his cadence. “Do you mean that making you happy is impossible?”

Caleb shook his head. “I’ll be fine. Grief is *normal*. A *normal* human being would process it and, oh, I don’t know, talk to their family about it instead of building a creepy robot replacement.”

She knew of the uncanny valley effect and compared her shoddy facsimile to photos of the Predecessor. But more importantly, he meant the other mission. “If I gather more data—”

“Remy.” His hand met her shoulder with a timid grip, like a child afraid of the stove. “You *cannot* imitate a person.”

“Caleb,” Remy said, “you won’t burn from touching me, and I am capable of learning. Please, teach me about the Pre—Emmy.”

Caleb solidified his grip, dark eyes boring into her optical units. “Listen to me! You may have family videos or whatever, and probably Dad’s interpretation of Emmy, but you don’t know what she was like when she was with me, or at school, or with Ben... or...”

Ben: the Predecessor’s best friend since 5th grade. Data indicated that he and the Predecessor were due to get together in a matter of months. He would often come over to bake until some point in tenth grade, after which Father did not recall him visiting. He was asked to speak at the funeral, but declined.

“Why can’t you just teach me? Or if you don’t want to, perhaps invite Ben over to teach me.”

Caleb threw his hands in the air. “I’m telling you that it’s impossible! Look, I’m sorry my dad is doing this to you, but it’s a lost cause. Give up.” After sighing he climbed the stairs, and moments later Remy processed the sound of the door slamming.

She was not allowed to give up. She was programmed for success. She could not process a future without success. It was clear: she needed more data. The first stop would be the Predecessor's room, across from Caleb's. Remy crept up the stairs, aware that while it wasn't explicitly forbidden; going into the room was probably violating a taboo. She paused, her digits five centimeters from the doorknob. While it would probably upset Father and possibly Caleb, she needed the information for her mission. Taboos are for humans. Explicit rules and guidelines were for robots. Remy fidgeted with her power button and opened the door.

The 12.25 square meter room was caked in dust. The bed was unmade, the scent of roses still clinging to the sheets. The dresser was in disarray from a few scattered cosmetics, jewelry, and crafting implements on the surface. That's right, the Predecessor liked crafting, though Remy didn't have much data for what crafts were done. Remy's data did show that one of Father's most-prized possessions was a hand-made journal. That Christmas everyone had received one of their own. Logically, that meant it was highly likely that the Predecessor had one as well. Humans like to match. It wasn't hidden under the bed; the Predecessor surely was cleverer than that.

Remy turned on her scanners. Not much was hidden in the room though something was off about one of the hardcovers on the untouched bookshelf. She approached it. A smaller object was inside *The Odyssey*. She grabbed it, felt the weight shift around inside. The book's pages had been glued together to hide a journal. This must have been it. Opening it, she realized it would take forever to read, because her optical units weren't made for scanning handwriting. She started at the end: eighteen months ago.

I don't need Ben. Fuck him. Nadia gives a shit about me, and that's the only thing that matters. I'll introduce her to Mom and Dad after New Year's.

Who was Nadia? That name wasn't in Remy's records at all, even for the funeral. The Predecessor's apparent disdain for Ben didn't match the data, either, but why would the Predecessor lie in her own journal? Remy looked for further mention of Nadia in the 5 millimeter writing and found a single entry from a month earlier:

I shouldn't have ever listened to Ben. Nadia may come off a bit gruff, but she's definitely not a bitch. Honestly, looking back at it, maybe I was the stuck-up bitch, not her. We have an in-joke about the smoking thing now. She's ~~cute~~ nice. I'm glad we're friends.

Remy yearned to know Nadia, this mysterious girl who seemingly captured the Predecessor's heart.

Two months earlier, one entry:

I'm gonna crawl in a hole and die. I thought Nadia was asking me out and I rejected her. She laughed in my face. She meant if I wanted to smoke. And obviously I can't do that if Caleb is gonna narc. I looked so stupid and I just wanted the ground to swallow me up. How am I gonna face her again?

Remy noticed one of her fans kick on.

Three months earlier, one entry.

~~I'm such a failure I can't even fucking drive.~~ You know what, fine. Who needs a car? Nadia can drive. I'll figure out how to explain it to Mom and Dad later.

Four months earlier, four entries:

Grounded for smoking because Cay is a fucking narc! He's such a judgmental prick about the smoking thing. At least he didn't mention Nadia. No anything for a week, and I bet twenty bucks that Dad won't let me get my license for an eternity.

Remy's databanks confirmed that the Predecessor never possessed a driver's license.

Fucking Nadia commented on how friendless I am. She's right. The only person I ever hung out with was Ben. I left club early and just hid in the bus shelter. What's the point of art if you can't escape your head?

How many friends was one expected to have? Remy was also friendless, though she wanted to call Nadia a friend, which was of course unreasonable.

Ben is the fucking worst. He had the balls to try to cheat off me in Pre-Calc after everything he said to me! After club, Nadia followed me and apologized about last week. We smoked at the bus shelter for a bit. I opened my dumb mouth and asked why a soccer player would smoke. This caused her to laugh. ~~She has a pretty laugh~~ All I got was “same reason I paint when I can”. That answer kinda pissed me off, but then we talked about what a douchebag Ben is. I could have talked all day about what a douche he is, but ~~a girl's gotta~~ I'm not gonna blab everything to a stranger first thing. That's asking for trouble.

It seemed probable given the context that Nadia and the Predecessor were in the same Art Club. Remy didn't know the details; it seemed likely that Father never asked. Remy's current conflict was how best to learn about Nadia, and digesting soccer information didn't seem efficient.

I shouldn't have told Ben. He didn't get it at all. And now he's ignoring me. Nadia or another jock bitch asked if there was trouble in paradise when I tried to get his attention. I don't think he'll tell anyone, which is good. I'm keeping it to myself until I'm out of this fucking school.

Personally, Remy felt it had to be someone other than Nadia. She didn't seem like a heckler. Remy didn't even know what Nadia looked like, but images of soccer players scoring goals at their game came to mind. No. No soccer information right now. Focus on information about the Predecessor.

Remy turned pages, trying not to spend processing power on Nadia. A Nadia-free entry five months earlier caught her eye:

What's wrong with me? I ~~don't~~ [the rest of the entry is unreadable.]

While Remy did want to know about this hidden side of the Predecessor, the desire to know more about Nadia filled Remy like a third purpose no matter how hard she tried to ignore it. Before she could check earlier pages, she heard someone coming up the stairs and quickly returned the journal and *The Odyssey* to their proper spots. She stepped away from the bookshelf before the door opened.

Father frowned from the doorway. “I didn't tell you to come in here yet, Remy.”

“I apologize, Fath—”

“—Emmy wouldn’t say that!”

It’s true. Her journals had made it clear that the Predecessor said “Dad” instead of “Father”. Remy ignored the heaviness in her CPU, and changed her wording. “I’ll do better, Dad.”

The disapproving frown she had grown so familiar with in development changed into a grimace and he drew closer, looming over her. “Emmy spoke at a higher pitch. Do your normal pitch.”

She raised her pitch. “Caleb requested—”

“Emmy called him ‘Cay’.”

There was a flutter of discomfort in her chassis. A cooling fan kicked into high-gear. Her fingers itched to touch her power button. “He requested that I lower my pitch and not use the nickname.” Remy met her father’s red-tinged eyes. “I know it conflicts, but priority two is to make him happy.”

Father nodded. “That’s correct, good job.” He stroked her head.

Should that make her happy? It was approval from her Creator, a pseudo-familial affection. But she was positive that the Predecessor wouldn’t approve. Reaching into videos of the Predecessor’s last birthday, Remy said, “I’m not a fucking dog, Dad.”

He chuckled. “Perfect response! You’re perfect, Em.”

She didn’t correct him before leaving the room. Coffee maker. Her clock said she’d been in there 56 minutes, and the coffee maker took 45. She went over the steps internally as she descended the stairs. As she poured the vinegar mixture into the sink, she noticed her cooling fans were back to normal. Humans are sensitive to vinegar, thus she ran the cleaning cycle again with only water. The burning query in her mind could only be sated by checking Father’s journal; while he would disapprove of her snooping, all the new data and contradictions advised against asking Father about Nadia.

Remy closed the door to the garage after herself. The journal was on the workbench, as always. She opened it and frowned at the 8 millimeter scribbles. She already couldn't read cursive; did it need to be messy too? The only things she could make out were the dates. This journal hadn't been used until after the Predecessor's death.

Remy jumped when the door opened.

"There you are," Caleb said, eyes on the journal in her hands. "Were you snooping?"

Her CPU was overheating. "Yes."

Caleb approached her. "It won't help you. He only started using anything Emmy gave him after her death." He took the journal.

"That conflicts!"

Caleb paged through it. "People conflict. So far everything in here is a note about *you*. Not Emmy. I'm pretty sure you'd already know this stuff."

She knew her own architecture well enough. "Then may I see yours?"

"Why? It's poems. Nothing about Emmy. She didn't know about them."

Remy recorded that fact. "Then, tell me about Nadia." Caleb seemed a much safer choice to ask than Father.

Caleb grimaced. "That's not recorded?"

"No."

He sighed. "Nadia was her new best friend after something happened with Ben. I dunno what. Emmy stopped telling me anything ages ago. And..." Caleb rubbed the back of his neck. "It was icy. Nadia drove them off a bridge."

Remy's CPU felt hollow. "How's Nadia?"

“Fine now, probably. She went to some school in Minnesota. I think she broke her arm in the accident? It’s not like we talked.”

Remy purged the dread from her system. An arm injury seemed unlikely to affect soccer, unless Nadia was goalie. “Why didn’t I know about her,” Remy asked, with more volume than intended.

Caleb stared at Remy, like the answer was obvious. “The same reason she wasn’t invited to the funeral: Dad.”

Remy’s fans hummed more and more, sounding shrill. She was not allowed to give up. She was programmed for success. She could not process a future without success. But she was clearly a failure. Failures were often relegated to free parts bins. She re-entered the house and Caleb followed. He said something. Remy couldn’t process it over the sound of her fans. Her Nadia begged her to rest, but regardless she trudged up the stairs.

Remy was unsurprised to see her father was still in the Predecessor’s room, now fussing with the jewelry scattered on top of the dresser. “Emmy,” he said, lifting up a pair of stud earrings, “you know, I should have pierced your ears.”

Remy heard Caleb sigh, could visualize his grimace. “Adam,” Remy said, with a CPU feeling like lead, her sensors overloading, “either decommission me or give me a new purpose.”

“What? Emmy, I can’t,” he said, and Remy hated him.

“Adam. This has been an absolute failure. It’s absolutely impossible to imitate a person, especially one that *you* didn’t know very well.”

Adam’s eyes filled with rage. “What are you talking about, she was my *daughter*.”

Her optical units were failing. Remy spoke calmly: “Emmy was Mother’s daughter too, and she was Caleb’s sister, Benjamin’s ex-friend, and something to Nadia. And I have to be a different person with each of those people. And you get upset when I do that.”

The air seemed to freeze, and Remy could feel her skin form goosebumps. “How do you know about Nadia,” the broken man asked, his volume increasing as he loomed over her.

Her CPU begged for release. She could no longer sense her fingers. “From—”

“—I told her, Dad. Don’t you get it,” Caleb said as he wedged himself between the two. “You drove away Mom and me because you were in the garage for eighteen fucking months to make a robot designed to ‘make me happy’, when *you’re* the one who needed Remy all along.”

“While it is my duty to imitate the Predecessor and to make Caleb happy, I have determined these are contradictory tasks,” Remy said while her voice rapidly fluctuated in pitch. “Not only that, but I have come to the conclusion I cannot imitate a corpse,” she said before her legs buckled.

Someone knelt over her, touched her shoulder, and hissed, probably burnt. Caleb. “Dad. You need help Remy can’t provide. You’re killing her!”

“Remy! Emmy, no, I can’t lose you again. User: Root, Password: Emmy, Create New Purpose: Remy is to find a new purpose, whatever she wishes.”

The third purpose sang to her. “N-Na, I” she said right before she felt someone press and hold the power switch tucked behind her copper-plated cooling strings.

“Just take a rest for a bit,” Father’s voice said, before Remy’s arms relaxed and she shut off.

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HONORABLE MENTION #1

Shane Paquette is just getting his feet wet in the world of writing. Currently, he's enjoying flexing his creative muscles, tackling any and all challenges he can get his hands on, and hoping to one day have the privilege of sharing his stories with larger audiences. A native of Ontario, Canada, Shane is married to a wonderful, supportive woman, and is a proud father of two beautiful girls.

The Piano

by Shane Paquette

"Just take it one note at a time." He said. "Look here."

Mr. Johnson sat next to the boy on their creaky oak bench, his spindly fingers hovering just above the higher range of white piano keys. Starting with his pinky he pressed down, slow and deliberate, singling out each note and letting it fill the apartment before moving on to the next one.

"You see? Each one's got its part. The trick is to let every finger have its turn."

"But Papa," the little boy said. "You can move your fingers way faster me."

He smiled, lowering his hands to rest on his lap. "Not always. When your Grandpa started teaching me, I had to go slow. Just like you."

"And you got gooder?"

"Well, what you think?"

His fingers danced up and down in a series of chords, half notes and quarter notes; something new and bluesy he'd been working on. The boy nodded, a broad toothy grin spreading across his face.

"Papa. I think you are much gooder."

He played the last few notes and then placed his hand on his son's back reassuringly.

"Happy to hear that. But, we all gotta start somewheres." He took a deep breath and moved his hand up to rub the back of the boy's head. "One day, you'll play gooder than me."

"I don't think so." He put his smaller hands on the keys in front of him, starting with middle C. On his fourth try, he managed to get through all eight notes without a mistake.

"See?" Mr. Johnson said, clapping his hands. "You did it! I knew you could. Now, let's—"

"Papa?"

"Yeah?"

"Can I go play with my soldiers now?"

"Oh. Umm..." He stumbled, surprised by hurt feelings. "Go on, then. I guess I worked ya hard enough today."

The boy spun on the bench, his dangling feet dropping down to touch the floor, before he began skip off.

"Ellis?"

"Yeah?"

"Mama's gonna be home soon. Don't make too much of a mess before supper, okay?"

“Okay.”

Mr. Johnson watched his son run around the corner into his bedroom, trying not to dwell on his son’s lack of interest. He turned back to the piano, playing that new and bluesy song from a few minutes ago.

It wasn’t long before he heard the key fumbling inside the lock on the front door. She floated in, as she always did, like a cool breeze on a warm summer day. No hint of the grueling twelve-hour ER shift on her face.

“Mr. Ray Charles, playin’ in *my* living room.” She said smiling, teasing him. “Heard it as I was comin’ up those stairs.”

“And?”

“Mmm-*hmm!*” she said, fanning her brow. “Lord, I don’t know where you store that.”

She leaned down to kiss him, then pointed in the general direction of Ellis’ room.

“How’d he do on his first big piano lesson?”

“Just fine, I suppose.” He avoided her eyes for a moment. “Don’t seem he took to it like I did at his age. He off playin’ with those figures of his now. Guess makin’ war with those little green plastic men was more interestin’ than... time with Papa.” He flicked his hand at the piano.

“Don’t worry none.” She said, cupping his cheek with her hand. “Give him time. He’s Papa’s boy.” She kissed him on the forehead. “Supper smells delightful.”

“Be fixed by the time you done cleanin’ up.”

She straightened up and winced, rubbing her temples. Mr. Johnson turned to face her.

“You head *still* hurtin’?”

“Don’t pay no mind.” Mrs. Johnson said, waving her hand. “It ain’t as bad as it was.”

They laughed together, later that evening at the table. Talked about the time when Mr. Johnson played his first solo in front of the entire St. Gertrude student body during their Christmas concert, when he forgot how to play the rest of ‘O Holy Night’ and threw up all over the music teacher. Ellis laughed as his parents did, not understanding why but wanting desperately to be part of the inside joke.

“I don’t think it were ever cleaned right.” Mr. Johnson said, still chuckling. “They called it the ‘puke piano’ for years.”

“Oh Lord, I forgot about that.” Mrs. Johnson stood up and began taking the plates and used cutlery away to the sink. “The custodian was gonna burn it up on the football field, right? Be ash on the wind now, if you hadn’t seen to it.”

“Suppose you right,” he said, looking back into the family room at the piano up against the main wall. “I think ol’ Jackson were just relieved he didn’t have to deal with the fire department.”

Ellis looked at their piano, and then up at his dad.

“Is *that* the puke piano, Papa?”

He put his hand on the boy’s shoulder.

“All it took was a bit o’ love an’ time, son. Ain’t nothing can’t be fixed when you’ve got both to give.”

The plate shattering on the scuffed parquet floor made Mr. Johnson jump.

“Carole? What—?”

His wife stood over the sink, gripping the edge with both hands, her legs wobbling for a moment until she slid sideways to land on the floor next to the broken dish.

Mr. Johnson jumped up, his chair toppling over behind him.

“Carole! What’s wrong??” He knelt down beside her, pieces of ceramic cutting into his knees, and cradled the back of her head with his hand. “Baby, tell me!”

“I just got dizzy, is all.” She said, her voice light and wispy, her eyes half-closed. “Just give me a minute, I’ll be all right.”

Ellis began to cry from behind them. She lifted an arm, reaching out to him.

“Honey, it’s alright. Mama just tired is all. Don’t go frettin’ over me, now.”

Mr. Johnson looked down at his wife. “We goin’ to the hospital. I ‘ma call Mama to come stay with Ellis while we gone.”

“No you ain’t.” Carole said, struggling to sit up. “Help me up now. I’ll be fine after some rest.”

“We goin’,” he said, easing her up. “You have that headache for weeks, and now you passin’ out in the kitchen. Come with me to the couch and lay down till Mama get here.”

She said nothing, wrapping her arms around him while he scooped her up.

“What *are* you doin’, Otis?”

“Carryin’ my wife. I don’t see no blood. Plate didn’t cut you, anyhow.”

“You gon pull your back again.”

He took her to the faded brown couch with the floral print, Ellis following close behind, and laid her down as if she were a porcelain doll about to break. She tsked at him.

“This ain’t necessary. I just overdid it today.”

Mr. Johnson was already on the phone.

*

A couple of weeks after the funeral, Mr. Johnson got a call from their family doctor.

“Three *months*?” he repeated, his lips shaking. “Why didn’t she tell me, Doc? Why she keep something like that from me?”

“Wish I could answer that, Otis. Truly, I do. And it breaks my heart telling you. But after some hard prayer, I felt like it was something you deserved to know.”

The doctor mentioned something about ‘condolences’, but Mr. Johnson had already begun to hang up the phone. He sat down on that same couch, the one she had been on just a month before.

“*Pregnant*?” he whispered. They had been trying for another for almost two years. She’d started blaming herself. He’d always wanted a girl.

He stared at the floor, tears cascading from unblinking eyes.

*

The first time he sat down on that solid oak bench again, he played *her* song. The one he had written for her for their first wedding anniversary. Ellis had just been born; they were new parents and run off their feet. The date had fast approached and it had completely slipped his mind until a couple of days before. So, Mr. Johnson stayed up late the night before, until the first rays of the dawning sun slipped through the blinds onto the kitchen table to illuminate the white of the sheet paper covered with scribbled music notes. He heard Ellis crying, so he got up and filled the kettle before placing it on the stove burner and clicking on the flame. Then he scooped up his papers, shuffled them into order, and slid the small stack behind the music book that sat on the rest above the keys. She shuffled into the kitchen yawning, with Ellis tucked into her arm in a soft blue blanket. Her hair was a mess, her fluffy white robe hanging off one shoulder, looking like one wrong word would ignite the fires of Hell. She’d never looked more beautiful to him than at that exact moment.

He said nothing to her about the song. He pretended that it was just another day, and carried about his business like he would any other Tuesday. Pretended not to notice how her temperament got ever sharper with each passing hour. Until just before supper time, when she’d had enough. He was sitting at the piano, playing sections of music, putting lessons together for class.

“Otis Johnson!” She said, storming into the room. “I cannot *believe* you’ve gone and lost your mind already!”

He stopped mid note, scrawling a lesson idea down on the small table beside him, doing his best to keep a straight face.

“Huh? What you mean?”

“You gone and forgot, didn’t you? First year—*mmhmm!*—you done gone and forgot.”

“Forgot what, now?”

She threw her hands in the air.

“My mama warned me about you, she did. ‘*Don’t marry no musician,*’ she said. ‘*They heads always in the clouds.*’ And now I went and had a baby with y’all, oh my *Lord* what have I done?”

He almost lost it then and there. She got so dramatic when she got upset, and he loved it. The laughter was coming up his throat, but he swallowed it down and coughed on it.

“What you on about, woman?” He swiveled on the bench to face her, positive she could see the corners of his mouth quivering against the hilarity of the situation.

“Woman?” she said. “You best not be calling me no ‘*woman*’ like that, Mr. Johnson. Not when you up and forget about our anniversary. Our *first* anniversary, I’ll have you know. You off to a bad start.” She started to walk away. “I ‘ma call my mama.”

“Hold on, now!” he said, laughing. “I can explain!” He turned back to the piano, pulling out the papers that he’d hidden that morning. She spun on her heel.

“You best have one hell of a good—”

Mr. Johnson began to play. The notes were quiet at first, stretched out into pear shaped semibreves and drowsy minims, an occasional harmonized chord to accompany each tone as the song floated above them both. It was light and wispy,

like the cool air on a mid-autumn morning, the kind that brought a crisp, fresh promise to a new day. She pulled her robe over her, tightening it around her shoulders, the frustration she had felt just moments ago being carried away on the breeze of purifying sound that circled the room.

Each finger began to play its part, the notes coming faster and more frequent, his hands moving higher up the keyboard. She sat down next to him, her back to the piano, falling in love all over again. His eyes were closed as he played, a delighted grin spreading across his face as she slid her hand up onto his shoulder. The song increased in its complexity, his hands a blur as the music swelled and lifted them together in its crescendo. As he lazily played the final chords and notes, he opened his eyes and looked at his wife.

"I never heard you play that before," she said, her voice soft.

"Well. This *your* song."

"What you mean, my song?"

"This how you make me feel, darlin'. How my heart beats when you around." He reached over and touched her cheek. "Without you, there'd be no music."

So, when Mr. Johnson sat down again after her funeral, the first song he played was hers. The song he'd played more than any other. The one that made him feel like she was there again with him, her hand on his shoulder. He closed his eyes like he did that first time, and cried as he played.

"Papa?"

The voice startled him, and he stopped the song. His son stood next to him.

"Ellis? You okay, boy?"

"That Mama's song, right?"

Mr. Johnson smiled, wiping the wet from his face. "It sure is."

"Can you teach me to play that?"

*

He was sitting at the piano that day, the day when Ellis came late through the door on a warm Friday evening. Football practise never went that long.

“Where you been, Ellis? Supper been ready for an hour, now.”

“Sorry, Dad. Had somethin’ to tend to.” He walked through the family room towards the kitchen and looked inside a simmering pot on the stove. “You eat?”

“I was waitin’ on you.” He got up from the bench. “They got phones at school, don’t they?”

“Course they do.”

“Could a called.”

“I could a.” Ellis ladled two bowls of stew and buttered some bread before setting it down on the table. “C’mon Dad. Eat now.”

They sat down together, Ellis’ head buried in the stew, Mr. Johnson staring at his boy.

“How practice be?”

“Alright.” He said, dipping his bread in the bowl. “No big deal.”

“You work on that bootleg been givin’ you trouble?”

“I guess.”

“They always hammerin’ you on that play. You say something to Coach ‘bout it?” He took a helping of stew from his bowl and ate it.

“Don’t matter none, Dad.”

Mr. Johnson sat there for a minute, chewing the soft beef in his mouth. Inspecting his son.

“Why you not lookin’ at me, Ellis? Something goin’ on?”

“Naw, Dad. Nothin’s—”

“You hidin’ something?”

Ellis put his spoon down, and for the first time that night, looked at his dad. Mr. Johnson shook his head.

“You ain’t been right for weeks. You grades slippin’. Coach says you been missin’ practice.”

“‘Coach says’.” He shifted in his chair. “You called the *school*, Dad? Checkin’ up on me?”

“Mind you speakin’.” He pointed a thumb in the direction of the phone. “They call *me*. Two weeks ago. They’s worried ‘bout you.”

“Bah!” Ellis waved his hand dismissively.

“What’s goin’ on with you? You don’t even play the piano no more. Your mama’s song—”

The young man shot up from his chair. “I’m done with that, Dad! Done with... with... with all o’ this!”

“All of what?” Mr. Johnson asked, stunned. “What you talkin’ bout?”

“You, Dad! You! That damn piano, and talkin’ ‘bout mama all the time. Not movin’ on, watchin’ you get worse every year. I’m done with football and being they punchin’ bag. I’m done! Finished!”

“Where this comin’ from, Ellis?” Mr. Johnson stood slow, his hands up. “Listen, now. Ain’t nothin’ been said or done that can’t be undone.” He took a couple of steps forward. “Tomorrow. Tomorrow we’ll call Coach, tell him—”

“I joined the Army, Dad!”

A silence crept into the room like a slow-moving fog, thick and heavy it filled the air. Ellis flicked his hand towards the front door.

“That’s where I was today. Why I was late comin’ home.”

“You... you what?” Mr. Johnson said, dropping his hands.

“Been thinking ‘bout it for months. Nothin’ for me round here. Not no more.”

They stared at each other, across a kitchen table that might as well have been the Grand Canyon. Ellis crossed his arms and looked down at the floor. Mr. Johnson moved again, trying to close the distance.

“You know what’s goin’ on out there right now, don’tcha son? Where you gonna get sent to?”

“I don’t care. This is what I want. There’s no life for me here.” He backed up, keeping his dad away. “And I can’t watch you anymore.”

“They’s a war goin’ on, Ellis! They’s fightin’ for oil in Kuwait! They sending everyone there!” He reached out for his son. “Please, son! It ain’t too late to change you mind!”

“It’s done, Dad. Papers are signed.”

“No. No! I’m not lettin’ you do this! I *won’t* let you!”

Ellis walked into his bedroom. “I’m eighteen, Dad. There’s nothin’ you can do about it.”

The door slammed shut in Mr. Johnson’s face, making him jump in his skin. He stood there, looking at the wood, the blue color that they had painted it together when Ellis was twelve, now chipped and cracked. He touched the growth lines that he’d scribbled in along the right-hand side of the door frame with his finger, the last one marked on Ellis’ fifteenth birthday when he’d decided he was too old for it anymore. Then he placed his palm on the door, hoping somehow his son would feel his father’s grief through the wood, that he’d come back out and tell him it

was all a lie. He wanted to tell him he was sorry, that he was proud of the man he had become. That he would support whatever decision he made for his life.

Instead, he turned and went into his own bedroom. And closed the door.

*

Mr. Johnson awoke one night to the sound of knocking. He was confused, disoriented, the room cast in an eerie dull glow from the digital clock on the dresser drawer across from his bed. He searched for his glasses on the side table and then squinted at the time.

“11:14pm?” he grumbled. “Who’s bangin’ at my door at this time of night?”

He threw on his old plaid robe and tied the waist around him, sliding his socked feet into his slippers as he shuffled out into the apartment, the knock growing louder and more intense.

“Okay, now!” he shouted. “I’m comin’!” The knocking stopped abruptly as he made his way to the front door.

The chain was always easy, but the door stop at the bottom needed to be wiggled before it let go. It was the dead bolt though; it always caused him problems. He fiddled with it, back and forth, pulling on the handle at the same time. Sometimes he’d had to get Ellis to unstick it.

“Be right with ya! This door’s always so damn—”

The door flung open, and standing under the subdued light in the hallway were two men, both dressed in formal military uniform. Mr. Johnson’s stomach sank, and he covered his mouth with shaking hands.

“I apologize for calling on you at such a late night, sir,” the first one said.

“Oh, please Lord. Please no.”

“Are you Mr. Otis Johnson?”

Gripped with the finality before him, he could do no more than nod.

"I am Sergeant William Holden, sir. This is Major Gerald Hicks, one of our Chaplains." He pointed beside him to an older man with graying hair, who solemnly nodded, but did not speak. "The Secretary of the US Army has asked me to express his deep regret that your son, Ellis, was killed in action on the borders of Saudi Arabia, in Khafji."

"No. Not my... my..." His knees buckled, and he fell against the frame of the door.

"The Secretary wishes to extend his deepest sympathies to you and your family in this tragic loss," Holden said.

"Family?" Mr. Johnson stammered.

Hicks stepped forward.

"Is there someone you can call, sir? To be here with you?"

"Ain't... ain't no one else left now." He wiped the tears from his face and took a deep breath, trying to compose himself. "I told that boy this would happen. I *told* him."

"We can stay here with you, sir. Until you are able to contact some help."

"No. Thank you. I don't need you to stay." He began to close the door. "Appreciate you makin' the trip to tell me, boys."

"One of our Casualty Assistance Officers will be in touch within twenty-four hours, sir. To discuss arrangements for Ellis."

"G'night, now," Mr. Johnson said.

*

He placed the folded flag on top of his piano, next to the picture of Ellis in his formal army attire. And for almost a week, the phone didn't stop ringing. Almost every family member and co-worker he knew offered their condolences, all telling him the same thing—*Call us if you need anything*. A few of Ellis' friends stopped by with flowers and cards, the girls always crying, saying what a 'nice guy' he was.

Even Coach called, stammering through a practised speech about hard work and determination, and how Ellis had been the embodiment of those values.

But the calls had stopped now. There were no more cards, and the flowers had died. Mr. Johnson sat on the edge of Ellis' bed, staring at the floor, the apartment silent. It would be dinner time soon, and he'd have to eat, though he hadn't enjoyed food for weeks. He couldn't taste anything anymore.

Life passed Mr. Johnson by. The weeks turned to months, which turned to years. He had taken an extremely early retirement from the school; a behind-closed-doors arrangement by his teachers' union, after his attendance had become so poor it was either that or be fired—and the school board didn't want to fire a man who'd lost both his wife and son. All it did was give him more time to feel the emptiness, the regret, the guilt. To recognize that those notes of magic and emotion that once kept his heart beating, that gave him purpose as a husband and father, were gone. The music was dead, like everything else in his life.

He left his apartment one morning to get some trash bags from the store on the corner. As he stood in the hallway fiddling with the key, trying to lock his door to leave, he heard a voice behind him.

"Hi! What's your name?"

Mr. Johnson said nothing. There had been enough children over the years that had come and gone in his building, and he'd always ignored them too. The door lock finally clicked and he turned around to leave, blowing past the young girl with the ponytail.

"I'm Emma!" she said as he walked away. "We just moved in yesterday. Right across from you. So, we're neighbors!"

He looked over his shoulder at her, but said nothing. Soon, he was down the stairs, and outside.

When he returned half an hour later, she was still there. Sitting on the floor, her back leaning against her side of the hallway, she jumped to her feet when she saw him coming.

"You're back!" she said. "Well, I just wanted to say 'hi' again. I thought maybe you didn't hear me because you're old like my grandpa."

"I hears you jus' fine." Mr. Johnson mumbled, looking down at his keys.

"Oh! Well, good!" The girl smiled. "Well, I'm Emma. It's very nice to meet you." She stuck out her hand. He glanced at it before turning his back to fumble once again with the lock.

"Go on, now. I ain't got time for you." The lock clicked, and he went in.

She dropped her hand. He didn't look back as he closed the door behind him.

It was well after lunch when he opened his door again, a full bag of trash in his hand to drop in the chute at the end of the hall. Emma jumped up from the wine-colored rug.

"Hello again!"

He couldn't help but be shocked at her persistence.

"You still here? Ain't you got someplace better to be?"

Her face blushed, her voice low.

"Well. My mom and dad were playing too rough and now mom is in bed. Daddy is sleeping really loud on the couch with his shirt off because he spilled his drink when he fell. He told me to sit out here and be quiet."

"I see." Mr. Johnson started walking towards the trash chute. Emma followed close behind.

"Do *you* get tired and fall down?"

He didn't answer. Instead, he opened the chute and threw the bag in. When he turned back, he almost ran her over. He noticed the filth on the front of her white, polka dot dress.

"So, what's your name?" she asked.

He grumbled. "Mr. Johnson."

"Do you have grandkids? It would be great to play with them."

He shifted to one side to avoid her and continued back towards his open apartment door. He could hear her skipping behind him. As he got to his entranceway, she squealed.

"Is that a piano? I love pianos!"

"Go on, now," he said, closing the door.

Mr. Johnson shuffled into his kitchen, filling the kettle for a pot of coffee. But before he lit the flame, he stopped and went back to the door, looking through the peephole. Emma was still there, her head down, and he watched her slump back against the wall and slide down to sit once more on the dirty carpet that lined the floor. She stayed there like that, long enough that his hip began to ache from standing there watching.

So, he went back to the stove, and turned on the burner.

*

He heard glass break just as he sat down for his dinner the following night. It came from across the hallway, louder than it should have been. The apartment building had always been quiet, it was nothing if not a dependable place to live, so he let his curiosity get the better of him.

The door across the hall was closed, and Emma still sat there, her hands cupping her ears, still wearing that stained polka dot dress. Even through the limited visibility of the peephole he could tell that she was crying, but the sounds coming from inside that room drowned out any fussing or whimpering she may have been making herself. He turned away, taking a few slow steps back towards the kitchen, when the tricorn flag caught his eye. The blue was faded now, years and years of sunlight and dust and neglect had stolen its lustre. But it was still there, in the same place on top of that old untouched piano, next to his boy. Mr. Johnson moved

to the picture and picked it up, wiping the few specs of dust that had made a home on the glass since he cleaned it that morning. He looked at his son's face.

There was a loud bang in the hallway, and something else broke. Mr. Johnson went back to the door, looking out through the peephole again. Emma hadn't moved. Only now, she was shaking. He looked down again at the framed picture in his wrinkled hands and nodded to himself. He undid the chain and the door stop, pausing to look out once more before unlocking the dead bolt. He expected another fight with the door, but it opened without effort. He cracked open the door, popping his head out. The girl jumped up, wiping the wet from her blotched face.

"Oh, hello!" she said, smiling through the tears. "It's nice to see you again."

He looked down both sides of the hallway before turning to her.

"You okay?"

Emma nodded a little too enthusiastically.

"Yes, thank you." She stole a quick glance over her shoulder at the door to her apartment. "Have you got some more trash to throw away? Could I come along?" Mr. Johnson pointed behind her.

"That happen a lot?"

The tears began welling up under her eyelids. She was still trying to smile, trying not to jump each time her dad yelled an obscenity. The mother was crying, begging him to stop from behind the door.

"It didn't used to. But Daddy lost his job. And he gets... *tired*. I have to sit out here."

The argument was growing louder, and Emma's body was rippling with uncontrollable panic. Mr. Johnson opened his door wider.

"You say you loved pianos?"

“Oh yes, I sure do.” she fought to control herself.

“Ever play?”

“I used to take lessons. Before Daddy...” She choked on the recollection of better times. “But not anymore.”

He looked at her apartment door, felt the rage behind it spilling out into the hallway, saw the terror in the girl’s eyes.

“If ya’d like, you’re welcome to come in and show me what you got. I was a teacher, a long time ago.”

She took a step and then stopped. “You think Mom and Daddy would mind?”

“How ‘bout I leave a note on the door? Let ‘em know where you is?”

Emma sniffled, a visible relief pouring over her face. “Okay!”

He closed the door behind them, smiling as he put the picture of Private Ellis Johnson back beside his flag.

“And maybe, if you’s up for it, I can teach you a song. You can come and practice here any time your Daddy gets tired. I used to play it for Mrs. Johnson, and my boy could play it too, when he wasn’t but much older than you.”

Emma sat down, opening up the fallboard, pressing each yellowed key cautiously. Then, she looked up at him and grinned.

He couldn’t be sure, and it would take some love and time to fix, but he thought that just *maybe*... he could hear the music again.

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HONORABLE MENTION #2

Born in North Carolina, Danny Thomas grew up in Tennessee, went to college in Alabama, and taught high school English before graduate school at the University of North Carolina where he earned a Doctorate. After 35 years in Human Resources he retired in 2006, then started writing. Find his website at www.dannythomasauthor.com, or tweet him @DannyThomasAuth.

Jurisprudence

by Danny Thomas

High in the Carolina mountains Zebadiah Gallant's just now found the rogues with the woman they kidnapped three days ago. It's mid-1854, May 3rd.

A small, bearded woodsman, wiry and cautious, Zebadiah's moving quietly through thickets of rhododendron, laurel, and holly, trailing the kidnappers on foot while the outlaws and the woman have been on horseback. Finding them is something of a surprise because Zeb was told the Coakley brothers are too fast for anybody to catch. His plan was not stop to sleep or eat or rest as he pursued them, and that's paid off. His pulse has been quickened all through the chase because this task is the first and only one he's accomplished without someone else telling him what to do and when to do it. There's a reward for finding the woman, too, but he's after something more substantial. He wants to do something important for once. To help somebody worse off than him.

He needs rest, but he's wishing he could tell somebody she's been found. She's not dead. He's not real sure how he managed to find her, but here she is along with her two captors.

Zeb smelled the men before he heard them. Heard them before he caught a glimpse of them. These outlaws, two Coakley brothers named Ralph and Leon, have one outstanding trait that gives Zeb advantage. Strong drink keeps them loud and reckless. The first person he sees clearly is the barefoot woman, her skirt torn high so one thigh is exposed with every step she takes. From the looks of it, she has been used by both men, and they're just lounging around the fire. They've got her gathering kindling as they pass a jug back and forth.

Obviously drunk, the Coakleys are laughing and yelling at her, grabbing at her when she ventures close enough, too lazy to get up after her. Zeb can smell their tobacco and body odor, rank from sweat-dried shirts, mud-dried leggings, and a complete lack of washing. He smells corn liquor and horses, too, but the horses aren't in sight.

After nursing the fire, the woman sits with her back to a large boulder so she can watch both men. She runs her hands through her dark, silken hair, nearly exhausted. She's a beauty, slender and delicate. He'd prefer to watch for a while to learn as much as possible. He doesn't aim to confront, but to deceive, and just now he's got no idea how to go about it. The biggest Coakley brother hogs the jug, and the other scrambles over when it gets set down and takes a long pull from it. Big Un snatches back the jug from his brother's mouth with a harsh and spiteful laugh. The woman is watching, her legs tucked under her. Big Un pulls out two more jugs, taking a long pull, his thirst so greedy that some of the liquid washes down his front. Little Un beckons for a taste without success. If looks can kill, Big Un'll soon be a corpse.

Darkness is coming on fast as once again Zeb improves his vantage point by crawling on his stomach. At times he rests his eyes, but each time he returns his gaze to the woman she's alert, watching the men. A gentle rain begins, and he runs both his hands into his poke to keep warm, retracing his steps to the shelter of a dead fir wide enough to keep him nearly dry. He's been awake nearly two days searching for this woman, and his stomach's cramping for something to eat. He'll try something in the dark, if he can, but isn't sure when that might be. Many have been sent out to search for her, but Zeb's the only one that's got her in sight. This is his chance to shine. He's been called simpleton and stupid many a time, but he's not stupid if he's found her, is he? He rests his eyes to think.

Eventually, he jerks awake, unsure how long he's slept, but soon discovers it's almost dawn, gray and foggy. He's ashamed to have slept so long, but that can't be helped. His bones ache some as he stretches out his kinks, returning to a watchful position. Both Coakleys are stretched out on the ground, most likely passed out. The woman's lying down, too, under a rock ledge.

His plan's simple. Go silently to the woman, touch her foot if she's not awake, hold his hat in his hand, a finger to his lips, and beckon her to follow so they can get away. Use a dead pine log to creep across a deep, rocky chasm, a log bridge connecting one jagged cliff to another. That would be the way to go.

The woman's eyes are closed, for which he's glad. She'll need her rest. He moves through the drizzle, watching the Little Un who's found his own space under another ledge, and there's the legs of the Big Un splayed out on the wet ground. Zeb stands stock still. By and by he's gotten close enough to the woman. One more step, and he can bend down to touch her foot. As he starts bending over, his knee joint pops audibly, and she opens both eyes, startled and says, "Oh." Zeb doffs his slouch hat, finger to his lips, studying her face, her eyes especially, hoping she will divine his kind intentions. He smiles, gesturing to her, trying to show her that, *We need to be a-going quiet as we can*. She stares and nods as the both of them turn to look at Little Un who's but ten feet away, sleeping peacefully. Zeb holds out his hand, and it's then he notices the rope attached to both her ankles. She can shuffle, but not run, a gentle deerlike creature, hobbled by thongs at her feet. His hand's colder than hers.

They get to where a decision must be made: head back for Hot Springs road or cross the other way over the chasm. The idea of getting back to the others who're hunting for her tempts Zeb. His pulse quickens in a panic at the thought of running like hell to get away. He considers the woman who looks ready to run, too, but she's trembling at her right forearm. The muscle quivers and twitches now and then. She's shaky. So is he. It's either run or hide, and hiding is something Zeb has always done well. It'll work if she'll trust and follow him. If they can get across the log bridge, the rogues might not know to follow across the chasm. As he's contemplating these notions, she has untied her ankles. He looks back the way they've come. If the rain continues, it will drown out their trail in little freshets. All that's needed is more rain, more time.

He whispers, "Step exactly where I step." He blinks after saying this, a little surprised the words come so smoothly out of his mouth. It seems he doesn't have to work at it now like he always has before.

"Hold it right there!"

Little Un is right there, a few yards behind them, his long rifle aimed at Zeb.

But Zeb tugs the woman to their left, which puts a large holly bush between them and this Coakley. Four more quick steps, and they're standing at the pine log bridge, but no further from danger because Little Un's taken the same number of steps around the holly, just as close now as he was before, maybe fifteen feet away. His eyes squinted, jaw set firm, the man snarls, revealing several lost teeth. Zeb glances quickly at the pine log where it glistens and where it doesn't and where the moss adorns it. He pulls the woman one more step, placing his foot where there's no glistening, nodding at her in hopes she'll do likewise.

"Not one more step!" Little Un growls. As he does so, he cocks the rifle, moving the barrel toward the woman.

"Who're you?" she asks Zeb, surprising him how calm she is, ignoring the Little Un.

"I'm Zebadiah Gallant," he answers. "Your brother sent me. Your gals is with him now." Her face lights up like a lantern.

Little Un steps closer. "Shut up! This ain't no tea party. You..." he jabs with the barrel at the woman... "Come off that log!" He grins his surly, tooth-wanting grin. "Get back over here!"

Watching Little Un, she tells Zeb, "I'm Jettie Davis." She clasps Zeb's hand with both of hers, and he sees how she's even prettier close up like this. They take two more steps on the log, moving away from the big man. The log is nearly ten feet long with plenty of air beneath it, sharp crags like upright spears twenty feet below. Jettie matches Zeb's steps so they're most of the way across now.

Little Un aims back at Zeb. The trigger clicks. He recocks, tries again as Zeb and Jettie avoid one last slick spot on the log, and they're across to solid ground.

Click!

Click!

Little Un hisses, "Damn it to hell!"

"Powder's too wet," Zeb tells her as the man draws out a large knife from the sheath at his waist.

"Yup, it is," Little Un answers. "But I still got this." He waves the blade back and forth. "What you got, little man?"

Zeb's wondering why the man doesn't just go tell Big Un and work it out together. They must not trust one another. They tear things down together, but don't build anything up. Abruptly, the man sheaths his knife, starting across the log bridge. With his first tentative step there's a corresponding, ever so slight twisting motion of the log. Just an inch or two with the big man balancing on it, arms waving a little bit as he steps on a glistening spot on the log. Zeb turns his head to see if Jettie's noticed the log shift. Her eyebrows go up as he hears someone say, "Huh," like a fellow's got the wind knocked out of him. Turning back, he's lost sight of Little Un, but there's another grunt, "Huh!" from down below. He looks down into the rocks, and there's Little Un, crumpled twenty feet below amidst the jagged, spearlike rocks, staring first at his right leg, which shows the ankle angled off keewidey crooked, broken all to hell. The bone below the left knee is piercing through his trousers, amazingly white, beginning to ooze blood. Little Un looks up at them, opens his mouth to speak, and blood emerges from one nostril and his opposite ear, twin crimson trickles.

Jettie says, "This here's Ralph Coakley." Studying the big man caught there in the rocks, she asks, "Do you think he'll yell for brother?"

"Is he even able?"

They watch Ralph wave his arms some, but he doesn't move his legs at all and finally quits, just staring back at them, blood spreading past his mouth and chin and onto his neck, slumping over a bit to one side. After a moment Zeb sits down, as does Jettie, whose eyes are heavy-lidded. She reclines herself against a rock as Zeb tells her, "Get some rest." And before his last word, her eyes are closed, and her breathing has become regular and deep. Maybe they should have run already. But maybe not. He's not sure either one of them has legs for a good, long run, but he might not be thinking straight.

A while later when she finally wakes up, Zeb says, "Now we got to get around his brother. You up for that?"

Jettie shudders, pulling her skirt close around her knees. Her face pinched.

"What is it?" he asks.

"Leon's the other'n, the worst of 'em," she says, her hands clutched around her middle. "He took me first. Did things I never..." She shakes her skirt as if a spider's crawled up on it, looking Zeb in the eye. "I had to keep them off my little gals. Ralph helt me down. They...it was...." She chokes, stricken wordless.

"Don't say no more. I got no right to hear this," he explains.

"Yes, you do!" she answers fiercely. "You're everything!"

He's glad he didn't show up when the things she can't tell about were happening. She has touched him with the telling this small part of her ordeal. He feels for her, but knows not what to say. They cross carefully back over the log, making their way back to see about Leon, who's still deep asleep. So they can see about him now without leaving it to chance.

Scattered around Leon are five empty jugs. The sun has come out bright and hot, drying things quickly. Zeb whispers, "I'm going to take any gun or knife he's got on him before he wakes. He's drunk almost to death, so we got advantage. But Coakleys are known to be fast and mean, so if he gets the best of me, head east, and you'll come on Hot Springs road."

Suddenly, she hugs him, tears sliding down her pretty face. Leon's splayed out asleep in the sand and pea gravel as if he's a rag doll thrown down by some giant child, one hand under a little pine, the trunk maybe six inches in diameter. His other hand is touching a cedar about ten inches thick. His legs run close to a large jagged rock half buried in the sand, a rock that has a narrow groove running across it. And as Zeb walks around the big man, who commences snoring, he gets an idea about how to punish him just right. There's no doubt what he deserves. Actually, Zeb gets two ideas about how to get justice like the Trojans got against that mighty Greek warrior.

He sits down ten feet from Leon, opens his poke, and pulls out a truncated blade, broken off, but still sharp as any razor though angled off blunt, more punch than slice. He also brings out six leather cords three feet long, testing them as to how much stress they can withstand, which he deems sufficient. Finally, he goes to find a fallen pine branch as thick as the big man's leg and maybe five feet long. It's just right for what he's got in mind.

He goes about poking and testing the big man to see if he's going to come out of his sleep, but the man is deep into his dreams. Zeb begins using his cords to truss Leon up so one wrist is secured to the pine trunk good and tight. The other to the cedar, just as snug. Both legs get fastened to the pine branch so the cords are taut into the groove in the rock, anchoring the big man down. Facing the sun and clouds, Leon's spread eagle, fixed tight, unconscious on the ground. Jettie's there, taking it all in, and Zeb asks her, "Tell me is he tied down good enough."

She wrinkles her brow. "Huh?"

Zeb sees he needs to some explaining, so he says, "They was a Greek warrior in the olden days named Achilles who fit the Trojan War. Unbeatable in battle, mean as a snake, but too proud to lead his own men."

Jettie frowns. "You think Leon's some great warrior?" That doesn't set well with her.

"Nope. I think Achilles got arrow shot in his heel where he had his great and only weakness. That's the first thing. Second thing is, I been thinking we don't need

Leon dead, just hamstrung. Slowed down. Give him a weakness.” Gingerly fingering the sharpened blade, he shows it to her, adding, “This little serpent’s going to bite old Leon right where Achilles got bit.”

“I don’t get you.”

He pats her shoulder. “Come watch how it’s done.”

Zeb finds a wide rock flat enough for his purpose, carrying it back to the snoring man, leaning it inside Leon’s left leg, bracing it with his own knee. Then he leans over the man’s ankle, sights where he means to work, and rams the keen edged tool into the heel tendon, slicing neatly through it, the blade thwarted not by flesh but stone, blood spilling onto the sand.

Leon jerks and moans when struck. His left leg spasms, but his eyes remain shut. Surely, this great lout of a man will wake as he’s being carved on. But, no. He’s agitated for sure, roiling around with some grotesque succubus that’s turned on him, chewing on his ankle.

“This cut will slow him down,” Zeb says to Jettie. “Take him a year or more to recover.”

She cocks her head, ready to ask another question. “So he’ll get over what you done just now?”

“The flesh could weave together eventually where this serpent’s bit him. Years from now.”

He reads her eyes, understanding what he finds there, understanding that she’s going to reach for the blade, still bloody to the hilt. She’s studying the big man’s ankle, raising her eyes to the heavens, whispering, “Give me strength, Lord,” but Zeb can see what she’s got in mind and how she’s got all the strength she needs. More, in fact.

Once again Zeb braces the flat rock against Leon’s ankle, and moments later a sizable chunk of flesh, perhaps two inches thick, falls from the leg, leaving a gap that can never grow back. Jettie tosses it into the chasm below as Leon has

awakened to pain. He's helpless as he jerks and bucks and lurches against his bonds, yowling and keening like a wounded animal that's lost a limb to a steel trap. Zeb staunches the wound with a rag.

"So," she says, moving away from her victim, "what do you think?"

Considering the wound and her that inflicted it, Zeb admits, "This outlaw's life is ruint."

"Good," she says, wiping blood from the blade, handing it back.

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HONORABLE MENTION #3

Katrinka Mannelly writes and lives in Fircrest, Washington with her husband Brian, daughter Tigist, dog Queenie and cat Riptide. She is a storyteller and always has been. Her book, *Section 130*, is available at barnesandnoble.com and amazon.com. Check out what she's up to at 130andbeyond.com.

The Fix

by Katrinka Mannelly

"You will feel nothing and you will not be afraid."

"Yes master," he mumbles, his eyelids drooping in supplication.

I lean in, seduced by the steady throb of his pulse. I inhale his scent, soap and musk. I flick his taut neck with my tongue anticipating the warm taste and jolt from his lifeblood. My fangs slide forward extending in eager anticipation. The left punctures the fleshy barrier with a satisfying pop and slips effortlessly inward finding the flow of a juicy vein. The right meets slight resistance and...

"Holy mother of god." I lurch backward and howl to wake the dead. My hand flies to my mouth of its own accord. I gingerly tap the fang sending new waves of pain rippling from my gums to my brain and back in a torturous loop. I roar in frustration.

"Master-dude, I feel neither pain nor fear from your bite as you commanded, but all your yelling is freaking me out," my youthful longhaired victim announces in his lazy entranced state.

“Be gone,” I thunder. He straightens his neck, fluffs his hair and starts gliding away with a faraway look in his eyes. “And remember *nothing*,” I add, as humiliation rather than sustenance courses through my being.

Master-dude indeed. What happened to the days of reverence? Of being powerless and exhilarated in my thrall? Today’s quarries are not what they used to be.

Mindful not to touch the offending tooth again, I wait and let it retract back into place as I head to The Underworld, a local hangout for sups, to drown my sorrows, numb my pain and maybe even find a sympathetic ear. I rarely allow myself to be vulnerable around other supernatural beings—I find it intolerably unattractive—but this reoccurring fang pain is driving me to a new low.

Ah, Juliette is tending bar tonight. The epitome of today’s witch, beguiling and beautiful. “Come on in James,” she calls to me at the door. Standard protocol for my kind, but unnecessary. My platinum credit card and I have standing invitations.

“Scotch neat. Your rarest, oldest and most expensive, if you please.”

“Celebrating or trying to forget?” the dreadlocked minx asks as she sets the glass down in front of me.

“Dulling the ache, I hope. Leave the bottle. I’m good for it.”

“A metaphorical ache, no doubt?” She leans her scantily clad torso my way.

“Literal, I’m afraid.”

“I thought I sensed pain in you, but what? I see no burns. Someone splash a bit of holy water your way? Press a rosary to your skin?” I feel her scan me with her third eye for some scar or scorch. Her brow furrows. She’s not used to coming up empty.

“I’ve cracked a fang if you must know. It makes feeding a bitch and I’m getting pretty damn hungry.”

“No,” she cackles. “You’re a sup. Healing comes with the package. How is it even possible?”

I down my drink and thump the glass on the bar, demanding another. “How does it always happen? A girl of course, a Lorelei, damn siren of the sea. We dated a while. It was novel. After three hundred years you yearn for something different, even if it is part fish. Rolling in the shallows, I bit her neck dozens of times, but one night feeling frisky, she insisted I bite her lower, on the bottom half. How was I to know mermaid scales are impenetrable? I cracked a fang and she laughed, the dirty harpy. That’s what I get for trying something new.”

Juliette holds her chuckle in, but her eyes sparkle giving her away—not quite the friend I was looking for. “You hungry sweetie? You know, we serve blood here. I can mix it or give it to you on the rocks.”

I shudder. My stomach contracts. “Cold blood is repulsive. It’s lifeless and flat, like drinking frozen metal. I have no idea how anyone can stand it.”

“It’s popular with the young vamps, honey. They love it with a celery stick and a couple of olives. Bloody-Bloody Marys have to be one of our top five best sellers.”

A frown, wrinkled nose and involuntary shimmy is the politest answer I can offer. Young vampires today, a phrase I loathe to hear—all glitz and shine. I hate the whole experimental lot of them; flaunters of the old ways, pillars of society, drinkers of animal blood, stars of movies and TV shows.

“I guess I could nuke it in the microwave for you.”

“Just keep pouring the scotch. I need help. Some sort of supernatural assistance. Any chance you know any witches who might be of service?” I flash my most flirtatious grin.

“My kind doesn’t serve your kind, sweetie. You know that.” She gives my hand a playful slap.

“What are you doing right now, my little enchantress?”

“Slinging drinks is one thing, aiding and abetting stone cold killers is quite another.”

“I haven’t killed anyone in a hundred years, not even the damn fish girl,” I mutter, more to myself.

“So you’re one of those then? More of a mother-sucker?”

“Well, aren’t you a clever one? Killing is messy business and labor intensive. I learned long ago, it’s better to take what I need and move on—no body to hide, no loose ends, no fuss, no muss. What are witches but human anyway? There was a time, you know, when I could glamour your type just like anyone else.”

“We’ve come a long way baby,” Juliette mocks. “So sorry sugar, you’re never going to find a witch around here to help you. We follow a code these days that doesn’t include helping vamps suck the life out of people. Even a little bit. It’s still a violation. But don’t you worry. You’ll be okay. All you need is JoAnn’s.”

“JoAnn, who is she? An outcast? A demigod? Some sort of Voodoo priestess?”

“Honey, JoAnn’s isn’t a person. It’s a place. A craft store. I’m sure they could fix you right up with some sort of needle or something to do the puncturing for you, if that’s all you need.”

Insulted, I grab the bottle and storm off to a table in the corner. After two or five or ten more rounds, this JoAnn place no longer seems like the worst possible idea, so I compel a sober patron to take me there.

We arrive in my Land Rover, tough, old and classic like me. Before I compel my driver away I feel sorely tempted to take a quick nip, but I know the price I’d pay. She is slovenly anyway, wearing stained ill-fitting yoga pants and a faded stretched out hoodie. I deplore the causal nature of people today and long for the days when dressing smart was a social norm. I pine for my brocades, silks and velvet. These days I do the best I can with crisp cottons, sharp linens and denims that hug my shapely butt. I walk through the large double doors, hurry passed the overwhelming stench of artificially scented cinnamon pinecones and take stock. I am handsome, vain, drunk, hungry, afraid to touch my tooth and one hundred percent out of my element in a big box craft store. How did I get here?

I amble through the aisles seeking the proper assistant until I spy Brenda. Her clothes are garish, but at least they match and are clean. She'll do. She avoids eye contact. Clearly she is on a mission and does not wish to be sidetracked, but whatever her errand may be, I need her more.

"Brenda, look at me." Why, oh why, should a mesmerizing creature of the night even have to ask?

She turns my way and immediately I know I have her. I feel more relieved than I want to be to know I've still got it.

"Yes master. How can I help you?"

"You will not be afraid and you will remember nothing."

"Yes master."

"Find me a needle of some sort. Something small, strong enough to puncture human skin and muscle, without making a mess, leaving a hole large enough for a sort of small straw to enter."

"I see," she says looking me up and down. Slowly I watch her raise her right hand to a cord attached to her apron and her headset. She presses a button and says, "Guys, I have a master, I mean customer, here, looking for something sharp to puncture human skin with. I was thinking of a quilting needle. What do you think? Any ideas?"

"Good God, Brenda. Discretion," I hiss.

Brenda stares at me blankly and listens to a response on the headset. "Oh, great idea. Thanks."

She focuses on me. "Melissa recommends a clay lace tool. It has a small curved blade on one side, master, and a needle for poking on the other, it should do the trick."

She pantomimes sticking herself in the neck with a small modeling device and grins.

“Never mind.” I hurry away from beaming Brenda. “Remember nothing.”

I’d flush with embarrassment if there was any damn blood in my body. This is awful. I just want my life back.

I twist and turn in my coffin all day trying to untangle my problem. Feeling desperate, I head back to The Underground in the early evening. I’m starving and may have to choke down some of their bottled blood to make it through the night. At least I don’t see Juliette on duty to witness my shame. I amble up to the bar, but my pride takes over and I order the scotch instead.

“Hey bro. You don’t look so good,” a shaggy regular ventures.

“I’m fine, thank you,” I reply, without looking his way.

“No man, you need to feed. I can see it and smell it and well, last night I heard all about it when you were chatting up Juliette. Super hearing holes, you know.” He shrugs, pointing to his ears. He reeks of werewolf.

“It’s not polite to eavesdrop, dog.”

“Didn’t mean to bro. Let me make it up to you. I’ll buy you a blood bag.”

No bite in this one. He let my slight slide completely. “Blood bag?”

“You know, a donor bag. Like a juice box for blood suckers. Look around, they’re huge with your kind. You haven’t tried it?”

I look around and notice several flashy young vampires slurping away on plastic bags. My stomach churns. “I’ll stick with the scotch.”

“Suit yourself. I’m Max.” He extends a hand.

I look, but don’t shake. I sigh instead. In my day vampires and weres were sworn enemies. How did we come to this? Mangy mutts offering to buy me blood in a bar.

“I may have a guy.” He leans toward me, whispering.

“A guy for what, pray tell?”

“Your problem. You know, the tooth?”

“You know a healer who can help? A dentist who works on vampires?” I ask, getting my hopes up.

“Well, I know a doctor, of sorts.”

“Of sorts?”

“He’s a vet, a vet who helps my pack out from time to time.”

“A *vet*? I am not an animal, you, you...”

“Chill man.” He places a hand on mine which I jerk away with haste.

“*Chill?*”

“Look. I’m trying to help you, man. We sups gotta stick together, you know?”

“Since when?”

“Open your eyes. Take a look around.” He gestures toward the seating area in the bar. I look and see werewolves, witches, vampires drinking, laughing and hanging out together. Not to mention gnomes and ghosts and maybe some sort of sasquatch lumbering in a corner.

“It’s a weird new world, man. Filled with technology, information and super smart humans. Trust me. It takes a pack.”

Lowering my guard a little, I ask, “This vet of yours, do you actually think he can fix it?”

“Naw man, he’s just a vet, not an oral surgeon or anything, but I’m pretty sure he could extract it.”

“*Extract it?* How would I eat? Are suggesting I have to live off plastic bags and cold blood in this brave new world of yours?”

“No, of course not. You could eat with one fang, right? The good one would still work. I heard you tell Juliette, you’re a sucker, not a killer, so why do you even need two?”

“All vampires have two. We have all, always had two. It’s how it’s done—with two.” I flash two fingers in a victory sign for emphasize.

“Okay, whatever man. Like I said, I’m just trying to help you, brother. It’s tough out there. Everything is changing and it’s not going to stop. Not for any of us. You either change along with the world or you get left behind. Adapt or die, bro. It’s up to you.”

Like the night before, I grab the bottle and slink off into a corner—not the sasquatch one. Also like the night before, after two or five or ten more rounds, my new acquaintance’s idea no longer seems like the worst possible one.

A few days later I’m in an uber on my way home from an appointment. Unable to wait to know the results, I order my driver to pull over.

“You will feel nothing and you will not be afraid.”

“Yes master.” She complies. The familiar slack spreads across her face and body.

I lean in, nostalgia courses through me at the rhythm of her pulse. I breathe in her clean flowery scent. I skim her stretched neck with my lips daring to anticipate the delectable flavor and heat. One fang slides forward. I’m equal parts eager and anxious. The fang pierces the skin and glides inward. Pay dirt. Ecstasy. Rapture. I swoon. It’s a brand new day in a brave new world and I am here, adapted and ready.

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GUEST WRITER #1

Raazia says: "Having lived in 4 countries in the past five years, I like to write about places and people you might not normally meet. I like how I keep coming back to the belief that as humans there is more to unite us than to divide us. I've written children's stories for *Dawn's Young World* (Pakistan), articles for various international publications, and my short story *Blue Book* won honorary mention in a national literary contest in Oman. These days I can be found running my digital marketing agency Bronze Digitals, working on my debut novel, and continuing to let my lack of a permanent address inspire me."

Donya

by Raazia Sajid

Most girls alone in the big city live with a friend or two. I've thought about it, but then I think about the rising waters in me if someone borrowed my red *manteaux* and it's not there for my visits to Dr. Q. Or how much work it would be to fill the silence. And I tell myself, I like being on my own. I like coming home to find the same things in exactly the same places, right down to the last crumb.

I have a fifteen minute window between coming home from work and my session with Dr. Q. I have to be at his office in an hour, but it takes 37 minutes to get to his office, which gives me just 8 minutes to be early and breathe before I go in.

I look in the mirror and tell myself, "I am beautiful." I think this self-pep-talk thing might be working.

I dab on enough makeup to look less tired but not so much it looks like I'm wearing makeup. Like all smart women know, the best makeup look is the no

makeup look, and it actually takes some skill to master. “That’s something I’m good at,” I tell Donya in the mirror.

I get dressed. Wearing the scarf right adds a whole other dimension for worry, but you don’t walk into a government clinic without a head scarf (or a long coat). I wear my favorite red *manteaux* last. It’s dark enough to make me feel like I can disappear, but colored enough for it to be a brave thing to wear. I’ve had it since forever, and it is starting to feel frayed around the edges.

What are you going to do when it’s too shabby to wear? Deena comes tearing through the confident thoughts I have planted in my head.

Dr. Q was the one that named the voice in my head. “Deena” sounded close enough to “Donya,” and it means “judge,” which seemed fitting.

I try to push her aside. I’ll find another one, I tell her.

You won’t find the same thing and you know it. You’ll have to wear something else. Or you’ll continue wearing it well until it’s shabby without realizing it, but no one will say it to your face...

Stop, I tell her. You’re making a mountain out of a molehill.

But I feel my heart rising and the back of my neck breaking out in sweat. In the mirror, the little girl’s scared eyes look back at me, and the thought has punched me in the gut before I can stop it.

He’ll know you dressed up for him. And what’s with the makeup? You know it’s a sign of low self-esteem.

I go back to my dresser, take off my scarf. My hands are starting to shake as I soak a cotton ball in makeup remover and lighten my lipstick until it’s no longer visible. Then I turn the cotton around and run it over my face, removing any traces of makeup.

There, I tell her. Are you happy now? All-natural. Except I’m sweating a little, the icky wetness trickling down my back. I glance at the clock. It’s 6:15. No time for a second shower. And I have to wear my scarf all over again.

Because you have to wear it hurriedly, you'll wear it badly, and you'll look ridiculous. You already make us look bad enough with all the things you tell us about him.

Man, is Deena in vicious form tonight.

I'm okay. I'm fine. I look great. I am beautiful, I repeat over my racing heart. Deena's still talking, and I hear snippets but I think I'm managing to quash her. I smile as I think of all the ridiculous things he tells me to say to her: stop putting a cap over my head. Go play in front of your own front door. Take the trash out, Deena.

And just like that, she fades into the background.

*

Dr. Q first asked me about my family in our third session.

"What was growing up like?"

During saffron season in *Aban* (late October to mid-November), *Baba* would take me to his family's village in Khorasan province. I loved not knowing which morning I'd wake up to him gently shaking me. "*Donyaam*," he'd whisper. *My donya. My world.*

I didn't say this out loud though. It felt too private; too mine. A rare gem in a box of stones. Instead, I told him the district I grew up in.

"That's a nice place," he remarked. "I've been to the local mosque a couple times. Very ornate."

"My mother held a lot of events there," I said.

"Were you close?"

Farsi has some interesting expressions. I'm reminded of *hay*, the sound you make when your heart is full but you're not saying anything.

"No," I eventually said.

“Did you want to be?”

When I was 13, a girl in my class asked me why I didn’t wear a bra. I knew women started wearing bras at some point, I just didn’t know when. I was excited about it, too. I later realized it was something mothers took their daughters shopping for. I eventually went to the lingerie store myself, of course, but until today my bras have never quite fit right.

“I don’t know,” I told him truthfully.

“When did you leave home?”

“Three years ago.”

“So you were... 16. Was that your idea? Leaving?”

“Yes,” I told the metal grill on the window. There’s an itch growing under my skin, like I’d like to get out of it.

“What happened?”

“It’s complicated.”

He gestured broadly to the room and smiled. “Then this would be the place, wouldn’t it?”

I looked at him. You know that feeling you get when you tilt your chair too far back, that split second of uncertainty just before you fall? I feel like that a lot.

“She found my stash.”

I had to give him credit for not reacting. He didn’t say anything, just waited for me to fill the silence. It’s an old psychologist’s trick, but it works.

“She can’t really afford to have a druggie daughter, what with her social standing. I came home high and she had company over...not her proudest maternal moment. I made it easier on all of us by leaving.” This was the first time I had said it out loud. I fought the urge to open the window and sit on the ledge, my legs dangling.

“Where did you go?”

“I stayed with my friend Ayda in the *patoq*—hangout—in Tiba Valley. Ayda looked out for me; I think I reminded her of her little sister. It’s funny, finding that in a *patoq*. You don’t belong here, she would say, gesturing to the hundreds of makeshift tents. I used to be offended by it, until one day I just wasn’t. I didn’t belong. The day I paid my first rent with the money from my job repairing computers I felt like a whole new person. My mother would have flipped to see the place... but it was my own, you know?”

“I know,” he said, and I chose to believe him. “What is it like, living alone?”

“The silence can be a bit loud sometimes, but it also feels freeing.”

“Have you been in contact since? With your mother, or your father?”

I shook my head no.

“Are you still using?”

I met his eye. “I’m not,” I said, “not for 11 months now.” And despite the light bulb burning a hole in my retina, my voice was unmistakably threaded with pride.

*

After the fourth doorbell, I start to worry. Even if Dr. Q is running late, someone is usually here to answer the door. The lady who makes the tea, or the secretary, or the janitor. I take out my phone, check our messages from this morning where I confirmed with him that we were meeting today, 3 Shahrivar.

If I’ve gotten the date or time wrong, I should get away from here so that no one will see me.

Stupid girl. Can’t even get the simple things right.

I check the date. Today is 3 Shahrivar. It’s 7:14 pm, 14 minutes past the time we were supposed to meet.

He's just late, I tell her. He's on his way. He's usually a few minutes late, but he always comes and apologizes. And we tell him it's okay, and we talk to him for forty five minutes, and everything becomes okay.

But after thirty two minutes Deena will no longer be placated. *He's forgotten about you. That's all you meant to him, that he can't even remember a simple appointment he made with you.*

My heart speeds up. I wipe my palms on my jeans, then worry about looking nervous so I try to stop. He's on his way, I tell Deena, but it comes out like a plea. Maybe something urgent came up and he's going to call, any minute now, and apologize.

You're an idiot. He forgot about you. And then, you're worth nothing to anyone.

I want to tell her that these are just thoughts; that they don't exist outside of my mind. But the thought is lost somewhere in my prison. I see people looking at the girl who's been stood up, standing outside in the freezing cold.

With trembling fingers I can no longer feel, I find Dr. Q in my phone and press call. Just a phone call. I can do this.

He picks up on the second ring, but when he says *Hello*, all my convictions disappear. Suddenly, I'm sure I was the one mistaken, that among the two people in this conversation about to happen, somehow he's the one in the right.

Before he picked up the phone, I was going to ask him, *Where are you? Are you running late? Did we not have an appointment today?* But my tongue seems to be frozen. He's still there – *Hello? Are you there, Donya?* - but the more time passes, the harder it gets to speak and eventually I hang up.

Deena is pissed. *You freaking coward. He stood you up, and you let him walk all over you. You do this every time. When are you going to start standing up for yourself? When will you stop being such a people pleaser?*

Stop, I'm begging her. Stop please pleasestop please.

My chest is shrinking, and the tingling in my feet is spreading. I've been standing still for almost an hour now but I'm panting like I've just run a four minute mile. Breathe, I tell myself. Just breathe. But there seems to be no air, and my knees give way as I sink down onto the stile. Immediately, I'm terrified of the people that will start gathering around me any minute. But I'm also equally concerned no one will pay attention to my lifeless corpse.

My extremities are completely numb, and I'm a prisoner in my own body. Someone is offering me water, and I desperately want it down my throat, but I don't know how to use my hands or lips anymore. Even though this has happened enough times for my mind to know that I'm not dying, and that this will (almost certainly) pass, my body does not seem to be connected to my mind.

The first time this happened, I was sure I was going to be paralyzed. I remember how after it was over, when my feet could finally be of use, they led me to Ayda's tent in her *patoq*. Ayda was not the hugging type, but she had held her fingers to the side of my face, and I had realized how much I had missed human contact since getting my own apartment. "I know someone who can help," she had said, before taking me to Dr. Q.

When my fingers finally feel like fingers again a few minutes – or possibly a few hours – later, the first thing I do is put my phone on Silent. I should take a cab, not least because I really need to pee—but I start walking. Maybe I do it because I am afraid I will unravel if I have to talk to one more person today; scatter like the saffron flowers grandma upends from their bags before we tear them apart to extract their stamens. Maybe I do it because I believe Deena when she tells me cowards deserve to be punished.

*

Back in the safe darkness of my apartment, I slip under the covers and take my phone out to see Dr. Q's missed calls. It feels like a sliver of light in a dark tunnel, a smile rising in my chest, a big fat *I told you so* to Deena. He cares. He called.

And that gives me the strength to do what I do next – to not chicken out. “We were supposed to meet at 7,” I say when he picks up the phone. “And no one would answer the door.”

“Donya, I am so incredibly sorry. My grandmother has been in a coma for a week now and today things got bad... I hate to make excuses, but time got away from me. I should have called...”

“Don’t worry about it. It could happen to anyone,” I tell him, and I have to marvel at how grown up and gracious I sound.

“Can we meet tomorrow instead? Are you free at 6?”

“That sounds fine,” I hear myself say. “Thank you.”

After I hang up, I search for a contact I haven’t searched for in a long time. I type a message. “8 pm, Tiba Valley. 0.2 g Ice.” And I fall into a dreamless sleep.

*

By the time I reach Dr. Q’s office early the next day armed with my red *manteaux*, I don’t feel much of anything. It’s a change from my usual jumble of nerves.

He calls me in. “I am really, really sorry about yesterday Donya. It will never happen again.”

No it won’t, Deena says. Because you’re never coming back here again. Say your goodbyes, because this is your last session.

I realize too late he is watching me. “Deena talking too loud?” he smiles.

“No,” I lie to him; my first lie.

His face is unreadable. He goes and sits down behind his desk, takes out his mobile phone. I thought therapists weren’t supposed to text or whatever during sessions.

I can’t sit still. I get up and walk over to the window. We’re at the edge of the city, all dusty roads and slapdash houses. Inadvertently, my hand reaches in my pocket to make sure last night’s buy is still there.

“What have you got in your pocket?” Dr. Q asks.

Shit, didn't think he was watching. Why couldn't you have left it at home, you idiot?

“Nothing,” I say, but if I can feel my face heating up, he can probably see it.

He's doing the silence thing again. I'm not going to take the bait.

“Is it meth? I thought you said you weren't using,” he says finally. And it is the disappointment in his voice that triggers the system crash.

“I'm not... yet,” I mutter.

“What do you mean, yet?”

I ignore his question. “You don't get to be mad at me.”

“I'm not mad.”

“No, you're disappointed, which is worse.” I don't know where this is coming from, or what this feeling is, but it's like the release switch has flipped. “You're the one that left me waiting out in the cold for forty minutes and didn't bother to call. *You* forgot about *me*.”

Deena stands in the background open-mouthed, but it's hard to stop. And maybe I don't want to.

“I counted on you. You were all I had, and you knew that. You listened, and you made me feel like you were there for me. You left me by myself with *her* while you worked nights, and travelled, and I never saw you.

“There were always people in the house. Did you know it made me feel like my nerve endings were on the outside? Like my heart would claw its way out of my throat? I would have told you, if you had asked, that I needed a quiet place, anywhere I could turn off the damned lights and just be...”

I'm breathing hard now. Deena is, oddly, delighted. My palms are clammy, and I know he's not who I'm talking to anymore. But I don't stop. I don't run.

“And then when she found the meth and I said I was going to leave, you didn’t stop me. *You left me*, long before I left. You don’t get to be disappointed.”

I sink down into the familiar black sofa. Dr. Q looks at me, and I don’t look away. He passes me the tissue box. I never blow my nose in front of people, but right now, it doesn’t seem to matter.

“I’m sorry, Donya,” Dr. Q says after a while. “And I’m so proud of everything you’ve become.”

I smile weakly. I’m exhausted, but also amazingly like a helium balloon floating in the sky. All I want to do is go home and get under the covers. But there’s something I need to flush down the toilet first.

*

I search for “Baba” and press call. I allow it to ring twice before I frantically hit cancel. My phone is slipping in my hands, that’s how sweaty they are. My heart is thumping so hard I wonder how I’m going to get any words out if he does actually pick up.

Then I panic and call again, because *what if he sees my missed call?*

He picks up. My heart rate is through the roof.

“*Baba*,” my voice sounds weak and watery to me, but I forge ahead. “How are you?”

I’m expecting panic over my location. *Where the hell are you?* Anger over what I did to them. *Do you have any idea what you have put us through?* But Dr. Q was right as usual. Time has a funny way about it. Suddenly, things you thought were important no longer seem to matter at all. Which is the only explanation for how he responds.

“*Donyaam*,” he says, and suddenly I am five again.

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GUEST WRITER

Doug Jacquier is an Australian who writes stories and poems. He's lived and worked in many urban, rural and remote places, and he has traveled extensively overseas. His work has appeared in several anthologies. His aim is to surprise, challenge and amuse.

The Red Brooch

by Doug Jacquier

We were sorting through Mum's personal possessions before she moved into the aged care facility and we'd come to her ornate, black-enameled jewellery box. She carefully sorted the contents into two groups; one to take with her (and leave to me when she passed) and one for her favorite charity shop. In her personal pile, I noticed a cheap costume jewellery red brooch, which I thought was seriously at odds with her usual good taste.

Picking it up, I said, "Sentimental value?"

"You could say that," she replied, with a slight tilt of her head and a movement at the corner of her mouth. I was prepared to leave it at that, assuming it was a memory she'd rather keep to herself but then she began to breathe very shallowly and her already wafer-thin skin turned to a shade of alabaster.

Deeply concerned, I said, "Mum, are you OK, do you want me to call the doctor? Can you speak?"

She seemed to return from somewhere else and her color improved a little. "Sit down. There's something I want to tell you that you must promise me you will never share."

“Of course, Mum.”

“I mean it and you will understand when I tell you.”

“I promise.”

I sat next to her, my mind shuffling through a myriad of possibilities; a secret affair, a love child, a theft...

She began timorously but her voice gained strength as her tale unfolded.

“During the war, life changed a great deal for women. Out of necessity, we took up trades, ran farms, drove heavy vehicles and all the other things that men had kept to themselves. We were even shown how to use guns, just in case the enemy ever invaded.”

Somehow this wasn't gelling with the bird-like, frail person in front of me and the home-body mother I thought I knew, but I didn't interrupt.

“When the war ended and the lucky men came home to their families, they took all those jobs back and the so-called natural order of things gradually returned. But many of those men, especially the ones who'd spent time in POW camps, had changed in ways we could never have imagined possible.”

Here she paused and began gnawing at her bottom lip. Again concerned, I leaned forward to comfort her but she gestured me away.

“Let me finish.”

In control again, she continued, gathering momentum with each sentence.

“Some just sat in silence, some just sat and cried, some couldn't hold down a job, some became drunks, some became gamblers and some became wife-beaters. There was no help for them or their families, beyond pull up your bootstraps and get on with it. Frightened, destitute families were in every town and suburb and there was no welfare safety net then. And so it began.”

“For goodness sake, Mum, what began?” my mind was screaming but I said nothing.

“Nobody knows, or has told, who started it but I remember at women’s gatherings and down at the shops back then a small number of women were wearing the same tacky red brooch you see here. Over a cup of tea one day, I asked a very close friend if she had noticed it too. She had, she said, and she knew what it meant. It meant that the woman knew of a case.”

Impatient, I said, “What sort of case?”

“A case of a man who could not be put back together again. A man whose friends and family had done all they could to bring him back to the human race but failed. A man who had beaten, raped, gambled or drank to the point that the misery he was inflicting was no longer tolerable but society seemed unwilling, or uninterested, in stopping him.”

I blinked involuntarily and rapidly and said “So what happened to these cases?”

“They were removed.”

“What do you mean removed?”

“Someone in the network with no other connections would remove him. A drunk might go to sleep on a railway track. A gambler might be found floating in the river and rumors spread of unpaid debts to criminals. A rapist might accidentally fall into a machine at work. A man’s gun might accidentally go off while he was cleaning it. There were ways.”

I could no longer hide my shock. “But Mum, that’s vigilante stuff! What if you got it wrong?”

“Oh, we were never wrong. If a woman reported a case it would be thoroughly investigated by others before removal was undertaken. That was part of the point of the network.”

“But didn’t the police get suspicious about all these deaths?”

“Oh, you make it sound like some sort of bloodbath. It’s not as if there were hundreds. Besides, there were police in critical positions to whom we could have a quiet word about not getting too enthusiastic about investigating further.”

“So there were men in the network as well?”

“Not in the network as such but, yes, there were men who were prepared to be helpful should the need arise. They’d also learned some new skills during the war.”

“Is it still going?”

“Haven’t a clue really but I haven’t seen that red brooch in public for donkey’s years. But I thought I’d put it in your pile in case it might be useful in the future. I mean I hear about some of these men returning from the Middle East...” and she trailed off.

The only thing I could think of was to change the subject so I shifted to my father. I asked whether there were any of his things that she would like to take with her.

“Oh, no, dear, I got rid of those a long time ago. I truly loved him when I married him but he was never the same after the war.”

The briefest of pauses and then she said brightly, “How about a nice cup of tea?”

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