



**THE
PREMISES**
A Good Place to Start
VOLUME 1, ISSUE 2
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**ONE OR MORE CHARACTERS WANT TO FIND A
SUPREMEY CAPABLE DETECTOR--ONE THAT CAN
DISCERN SOMETHING ALMOST IMPERCEPTIBLE...**

Divided We Stand

Welcome to the second issue of On The Premises! Things were rocky there for a while...our premise confused a few people, and we apologize for that. As we said in our newsletter, we learned a lot about what makes a good premise and what doesn't, and we'll apply what we learned from now on.

(What do you mean you don't subscribe to our monthly, very short newsletter? Silly reader! Write to SignMeUp@OnThePremises.com and we'll correct your error in judgment.)

What else did we learn? Our prize judges have even more diverse tastes than we thought. Opinions on the honorable mentions were highly divided. Lots of fun and interesting arguments, which is good in my opinion, because one of our goals is to produce issues that contain a variety of stories, for a variety of tastes.

See, some fiction magazines seem to publish the same kinds of stories over and over. We don't want to. The first issue had no science fiction pieces; this issue has, arguably, three. But three very different kinds of science fiction! Plus a comedy and a straightforward Arabian-style fantasy. If you can find a fiction magazine that publishes five stories more different from each other than these in the same issue, let us know. We may have set a record. I believe every fan of short fiction will find something they like in this issue.

Enough blather. On with the stories! And be sure to check out the cartoons our illustrator, Francis Heaney, provided. We think he came through for us again, but what do you think?

Keep writing and keep reading!

Tarl Roger Kudrick,
co-publisher of On The Premises magazine

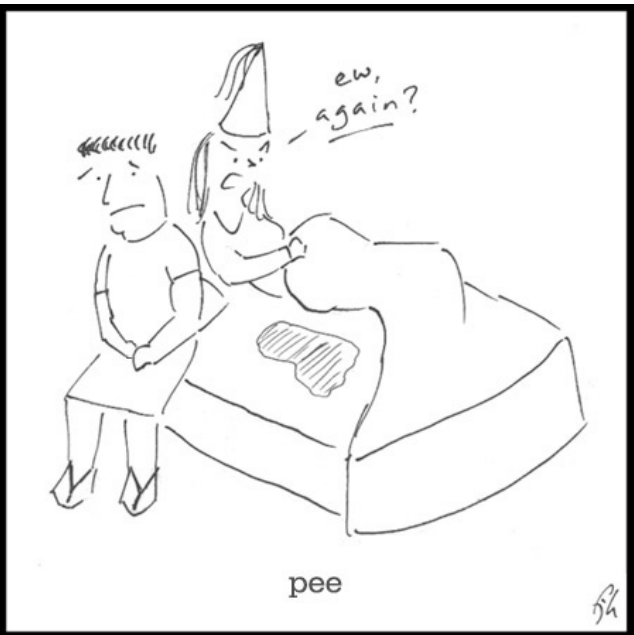
Cartoons!

We told our cartoonist we were “sort of” basing the second contest on the old Princess and the Pea fairytale. Just as we were about to explain the super-detector business, he said, “You mean the stories are about delicate women who can’t sleep? Great!” Then he hung up and locked himself in a bank vault until weeks later, when he handed us these cartoons.

We liked them so much we didn’t have the heart to tell him he’d missed the point of our contest. Then again, our premise confused other entrants too. So, what the heck. Here is Francis Heaney’s compendium of...

other things that will keep a princess
from getting a good night's sleep





FIRST PRIZE

Ken lives in Massachusetts with his wife, Lisa. They would like to retire to Idaho someday after many road trips together. Ken's web site can be found at <http://www.kenliu.name>.

Ken has previously been published in Strange Horizons and Polyphony 4.

Ken wants you to know Platinum Blue is a real company about which you can learn more in this New Yorker article (http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2006/10/16/061016fa_fact6). Also, in his own words, "The description of the dilemma facing contemporary Chinese writers is inspired by the writings of Wang Xiaobo and his disciples. I wish them luck."

Beneath the Language

by Ken Liu

*The language beneath the language:
This is poetry.*

Andrea Pacione

After two weeks of last-minute cancellations and bad cell phone reception, I finally caught up with Cal Solulu in Shanghai. Just under six feet, Solulu was a barrel-chested man in his early thirties, with short legs and long arms that gave him the air of an orangutan.

He was speaking at a government-sponsored conference for the China Writers Association. CWA, a curious organization with no real Western equivalent, is best described as a government ministry *cum* writer's guild dedicated to the quixotic task of preserving Marxism-Leninism orthodoxy while cultivating the freedom of a new Chinese literary voice. It seemed a strange audience for a man whose whole message was that ideology and literary taste alike were mere illusions.

Solulu isn't bothered by the irony of his presence at the CWA.

“The young Chinese writers are more receptive to my message than anybody else. They way they explain it to me, the Chinese feel that they don’t have much of a native contemporary culture to speak of. In the last hundred years, they haven’t been able to come up with anything, a picture, a movie, a musical movement, that isn’t derivative of something the West -- or even worse for them, Japan -- invented. They are humiliated, but they are also less invested in the idea of creativity than we are in the West. This makes them more willing to listen to radical ideas.”

We were sitting in the lounge of the Manhattan Palace, one of Shanghai’s newest and most expensive Chinese-owned and operated hotels, an eighty-story concrete-and-glass tower erected in only 181 days in the perpetual frenzy of construction that defines modern Shanghai. As if illustrating Solulu’s point, there was nothing original or Chinese about the place: the muzak was a bad copy of jazz, the color scheme a bad copy of the Shanghai JC Mandarin, the furniture gaudy imitations of five-year old Japanese designs, and the drinks menu full of translation errors. The staff stood around aimlessly, green actors on a new set with no script. The most coherently Chinese thing about the place was that it felt like a copy of a copy of a copy.

But if Solulu is right, the Chinese don’t have to copy. Creativity, according to Solulu, is an algorithm that can be mastered and applied relentlessly, much like the way the Chinese have already diligently mastered the art of cheap and efficient manufacturing.

* * *

Solulu isn’t ashamed to admit that he began as a failed poet. He’s not ashamed because he thinks poets have no understanding of what they are doing.

“Most successful poets are like idiot savants,” he said. “They can no more explain how they write poetry than a fish can explain how it swims. If they are successful, they think they’re geniuses. If they are not, they think the critics are philistines. They’re ignorant about the mechanism of their art.”

As a boy, Solulu had poured his heart into “notebook after notebook” of poetry. He wrote letters to Ashbery, Merwin, and other names he found in the Poetry section of the local bookstore, asking them to be his mentors. (Only Margaret Atwood ever wrote back, though Solulu wouldn’t tell me what she said, only that it was “what you’d expect from her poems.”) He did all the “right” things: he read, he wrote, he collected rejection slips. But he never got published anywhere, not even in his college literary journal.

“It was embarrassing. It’s very difficult to maintain the argument that you are simply not ‘understood’ when your classmates are reading all the same books as you and share all the same references as you and they *still* don’t like your poems. Very disheartening.”

Then, sometime in the summer of his Junior year, he had what he called his “crisis moment.” He received his one hundredth rejection slip.

“I showed the rejection slip to my girlfriend at the time. To make me feel better, she said she’d read my submissions and give me comments. But the next day I could tell, before she even said a word, that she couldn’t even finish them. It was devastating. I couldn’t bear to write another word until I understood what it was that made good poetry good.”

* * *

I should stress here that Solulu isn’t interested in the theoretical debates that have raged among intellectuals from Plato’s guests to today’s literary critics and academics over what separates good poetry from bad, and how these judgments could and should be made. To Solulu these debates are nonsense. He knows what “good” poetry is -- it’s simply what has proved popular over time -- or, as he puts it, good poetry is poetry that “resonates with the greatest number of souls over time.” The much more difficult and interesting question for him is *what* makes one poem resonate more than another. He’s convinced that no one really understands that secret, especially not the successful poets.

“The things poets say about their *craft* and their *process* have almost nothing to do with what separates good poems from bad ones. In fact, poets are like the money managers on Wall Street” -- and here I saw flashes of Wallace Stevens’ most unpoetic mien -- “who go around with their stock charts and their P/E ratios, convinced that they know how to pick great stocks. And year after year, the vast majority of them fall short of the index, and neither the lucky ones who happen to win that year nor the unlucky ones who lose all their clients’ money understand what happened. But that doesn’t prevent them from babbling to the financial reporters that *of course* it was because it was the first Monday in March that the Dow moved up 20 points that morning. The successful poet and stock picker alike are good at only one thing: manufacturing *ad hoc* justifications for their good fortune.”

“That sounds a bit bitter, coming from a failed poet,” I said.

“No, no, no,” he said, laughing but emphasizing each “no” with two shakes of his head, that wild mane of unkempt white hair flying about. “I *was* bitter, but not any more. Now I have the answer.”

* * *

Solulu found his answer, as so many do in our age, in the heart of a machine.

The machine in this case is a spaghetti mess of code (he's too embarrassed to show it to me) that Solulu wrote over five years. When this program is fed the sound of a poem written in modern English -- a limitation due to the corpus used to train the program rather than an inherent feature of the algorithm -- being read aloud, it will predict, with much greater than 99% accuracy, whether the poem will be sufficiently popular to be included in more than three poetry anthologies today.

“So the first thing you have to do is to define the problem: how will I objectively know when I've found a way to tell the good poems apart from the bad poems? The only legitimate measure is meme survival. In the short term there may be all kinds of noise that cause a poem to be popular: the author is a celebrity; the topic is politically relevant; Venus and Mars are in opposition; whatever. But in the long term, fads fade out, and only good poems survive.”

Obsessed with the problem, he went to flea markets and yard sales and bought up hundreds of poetry magazines published in the last century. First, he read through them, trying to see if he could predict which poems would survive thirty, forty years down the road. Then he diligently applied theories of aesthetics, from Aristotle to Addison, from Dostoyevsky to Vendler. It was often a challenge just to figure out what the critic even meant. In any event, these theories turned out to be no better at predicting success than random chance.

About four months into the project, Solulu hit a dead end.

“All these theories of poetics and aesthetics and the history of criticism and ideas were swirling around in my head, and I was trying out anything, everything, that could help me figure out the pattern of which poems survived and which ones didn't. But one day I sat up, read a bunch of poems, and realized I hated all of them -no, more like I couldn't tell whether I *liked* any of them. It was as if a musician suddenly woke up and realized he was tone deaf, or if you woke up and realized that you couldn't tell the pretty girls apart from the plain ones. I was *beauty blind*.”

This beauty blindness lasted for several weeks, during which time he seriously considered suicide.

He was finally saved by our least poetic modern medium, television. He was at home, mindlessly letting the glow of the tube wash over him. The program was a documentary on the vanishing oral traditions of “some nomadic camel herding people out there in Mongolia.”

“There was this scene, which lasted maybe five or six minutes. It was just this old man reciting something. The subtitles were in white text, and I couldn't read it against the white dunes on the bottom of the screen. I had no idea what he was saying, but it was beautiful. I could feel my heart beating in time with the rhythm of his speech. I could hear the meter, the rhymes, the musicality of the tones, even though I couldn't understand what he was saying. I

was enraptured, *transported*, in a way that I had never been before by poetry in English. I literally could hear the blood rushing in my ears; I was so excited. There it was, just like that, I could hear beauty again.”

The experience gave Solulu a series of insights into the problem. First, it had to be about beauty, not theory. Second, language was a distraction. Finally, the “good poem detector” had to be a machine.

* * *

“The core problem is that we don’t trust first impressions.” He waved his chopsticks in the air. “You see a painting, and you know whether you like it or not within a tenth of a second. But you don’t trust that feeling. You’ve been taught that art must be ‘appreciated.’ You think you have to *understand* the painting before you can really say if you like it. You think you have to read that little pompous card written by the museum curator, which gives you the painting’s title in French and its English translation, a one-sentence biography of the painter, and a few pieces of useless trivia. And if you’ve been to a good college, well, then I really pity you. Then you think you have to pay ten dollars for the little electronic wand with the tinny speaker so that you can punch in the number under each painting and listen to the little speech from the curator about *why* the painting was good. And at the end of it all, you think you’ve learned something. You think you now know why you should like the painting.

“But that’s just garbage. All of it. Nothing mattered after that first tenth of a second. Everything afterwards was just noise, epiphenomena, froth on the sea. But as a society, we have beaten into ourselves the idea that the noise and the epiphenomena are the real deal, that the justification is more important than the snap judgment. We know almost immediately if we prefer this painting to that painting and if we like this poem better than that poem. But we talk ourselves into a muddled confusion when we try to explain that preference. The intellect gets in the way.”

That was insight number one. Step two?

“There’s this misunderstanding that because poetry is composed with words, language and meaning and reasoning had to be the most important part of the appeal of a poem. But poetry is a lot more like music.”

Solulu got his inspiration from a company called Platinum Blue, which was in the business of predicting which songs by unknown artists would be hits. Their technology ignored everything except the pure mathematical shape of the songs.

The idea struck a chord with Solulu.

“When I was listening to the old Mongolian herdsman I was experiencing poetry in a raw form that we seldom do any more. Mostly we read poetry silently, and we analyze poems as patterns of words on a page. But the written language is a distraction. Poetry is about the spoken word, and the spoken word is just syllable and sound and fury. Listen to this:

*“Hige sceal þe heardra, heorte þe cenre,
mod sceal þe mare, þe ure mægen lytlað.”*

“Do you know it?”

I shook my head. It sounded German, or maybe Klingon.

“But I bet that you could hear that it was poetry. And I bet you had an opinion of whether you liked it.”

He was right. I knew it was poetry. I could hear the hard pounding beats, like sword against a shield. And I wanted to hear more.

“That was from the *Battle of Maldon*, in the original Anglo-Saxon. It’s related to modern English, but I don’t think you understood a word of it. You know nothing of its imagery, metaphor, its history, its place in the canon of English poetry, but you knew you liked it. In fact, for most people who had to take Anglo-Saxon in school, these two lines are probably the only ones they will remember. The sound of good poetry is that powerful. It’s like the chorus of a catchy song. It hooks you and pulls you in, and you don’t care that the lyrics are nonsense.

“I could try the same experiment with you with a popular old poem in Chinese, in Japanese, in Arabic, and it would be the same every time. If it’s read by someone with even the smallest bit of musical talent, you’ll be able to tell that it’s poetry, and you’ll be able to tell me whether you like it or not, just like that.”

Solulu doesn’t mean that you don’t need to understand the language to understand the poem. Of course you have to know what the words mean to understand the story being told, the sentiment being expressed, or the revolutionary message that’s embedded. But he makes the radical claim that understanding is, in fact, a distraction for determining whether you like a poem. The sound of a poem is always there, like the bass line of a song, even if you are just reading the poem to yourself, silently. The musical shape of a pop song determines our emotional response, even though we may end up thinking that we like it because of its clever lyrics. In the same way, the sound of a poem is what really moves us, even if we think it’s about the clever words.

* * *

At first glance, Solulu's program cannot be used, directly, to generate a good poem. This is a consequence of the way the program evolved as a neural network. Solulu refined it over time by reading it poetry from various period publications. Each poem's mathematical signature was a bit of input. He then found out which of those poems survived in multiple modern anthologies used in undergraduate literature classes, a reasonable proxy for success. These survivors were then marked and fed to the program again, and the program was asked to discover patterns in their signatures that distinguished them from the poems that did not survive. It did so simply by brute force trial and error until it generated some complex mathematical function that mapped all the inputs to the right outputs, but the function is really a black box. You can ask it questions and get back an answer, but even Solulu has no idea how it really "works."

To test the program, you simply feed it a new poem, and check the program's prediction against real life.

For Solulu's theory to be of use, it's okay for the program to generate false positives (i.e., poems that the program predicted would succeed but in fact did not), but it's imperative that it generate few, if any, false negatives (i.e., poems that the program predicted would not succeed but in fact did). This is because Solulu's theory presupposes that no inherently bad poem can ever succeed in the long run, but it is possible for an inherently good poem to never be given a fair chance to spread (think of Emily Dickinson if she had simply locked all her poems away).

A consequence of this asymmetry is that if you run it over old poetry magazines you may well end up discovering overlooked good poets. It's not hard to imagine that someone who's very talented but also a bit of a recluse may publish only a few times in an obscure journal and never gain more than a few readers. If none of them happens to be an important editor or prominent critic, the poet would end up languishing in obscurity for eternity. Using his program, Solulu has already managed to discover two poets from the eighties who, he assures me, "are as good as anything on Harvard syllabuses today." (He's currently editing collections of their poems for Harvard University Press.)

If you believe past performance is a good predictor of future success, Solulu's algorithm undeniably works. He has run it on English poems as far back as the Renaissance, and the false negative rate is lower than one hundredth of one percent.

* * *

Solulu has detractors.

I met with Len Keene, the Stuart B. Dunbar Professor of English and American Language and Literature at Harvard University, a few weeks after I came back from Shanghai.

“Cal was a student of mine,” Keene told me. “People find that surprising. Maybe he’s proof that I’m a terrible teacher.” He laughed.

Keene thinks Solulu is part of a general trend in today’s academic world in which reductionism -- whether in the form of E.O. Wilson’s sociobiology, Noam Chomsky’s universal grammar, or Cal Solulu’s “good poetry detector” -- is attacking the realm of culture, taste, society, the traditional enclave of the messy humanities.

Keene can live with the first two steps in Solulu’s logic (although he isn’t exactly happy with them). Of course, under the logic of his first step, if good poetry is to be evaluated by immediate impressions of beauty rather than theories of worth, everyone is a suitable judge of poetry *except* the academics. But Keene is used to this kind of anti-ivory tower populism, and besides, the academy has proved itself quite adaptable by inventing the field of cultural studies to co-opt its critics. Under the logic of Solulu’s second step, it is the sound of poetry, rather than its sense, that determines the bulk of our impressions of beauty in a poem before the “sense” and “meaning” come in to confuse us. Keene finds these ideas more quaint than troubling, since the analysis of poetry *as* predominantly a form of music hasn’t been taken seriously, by anyone, in a long time.

It’s the third step in Solulu’s reasoning that really irks Keene.

“Fundamentally, what we find beautiful must be explained at the level of neurobiology,” Solulu wrote in a public, online debate with Keene last June. “And I am convinced that our individual neurobiology isn’t so different from each other. We are all members of the same species, sharing pretty much the same genes, and at a deep level, our brains will likely react similarly to similar stimuli. If I find a particular pattern of colors pleasing, it is because the light from that pattern of colors causes my brain chemistry to change in a certain way. But you, as a fellow member of the human species, likely has a brain very similar to mine. That same pattern of light is thus likely to cause similar changes in your brain chemistry, and you are also likely to find that pattern of colors pleasing.

“We do not need to understand exactly which patterns of vowels and consonants will produce these pleasurable states or how or why. It is enough that we will feel this way at a level that is beneath and above thought.

“But thoughts inevitably come in, and our brain chemistry is altered as we try to outdo each other in cleverness, in coming up with reasons and explanations for that fleeting first impression upon which so much depends. So much then becomes muddled and confused. The epiphenomena froth over and hide the deep currents and waves of real beauty.

“We need a way to access the non-linguistic, non-analytical core of our common heritage as *homo sapiens*, the human animal, without all the noise and distractions. But it’s too late to get back to that Zen-like state in ourselves. The best we can hope for is to model that core of ourselves, to recreate the beauty-detecting faculty in a machine.”

When I asked Keene about these comments, he was silent for a long time. He was one of these people who, instead of filling silence with useless chatter, is comfortable with it. Remaining in my chair across from his desk, I glanced over the spines of the books in his office. A handsome copy of the Douay-Rheims Bible sat on his shelf, dwarfing the collection of C.S. Lewis paperbacks next to it. I looked at Keene, pointed at the Bible, and raised my eyebrow. He smiled and invited me to take a walk with him.

“I am not qualified to criticize Cal’s science, though I think he is misusing science. My disagreement with him is really one of philosophy. His arguments have an unhealthy attraction for undergraduate students, the way all elegant, beautiful, and astonishingly bad ideas do. The assault on humanism from this relentless drive to reductionism has been ongoing for more than two centuries, but there is something particularly cold about Cal’s assault. He has declared that we should turn over our aesthetic judgments to a machine. He is arguing, in essence, that not only can machines play chess better, they can also better judge what is beautiful and worth reading. In making an argument that is premised on reason he has discarded reason as an empty shell. It is a meaningless conclusion, a view of the soul as a void. And if I may misquote Charles Darwin: there is *no* grandeur in this view of life. It is ugly, and I despise it.”

Over lunch Keene, who was Solulu’s academic advisor in college, told me a story from Solulu’s time as a student. Solulu had broken up with his girlfriend after she somehow insulted him. That June, he ran against her for class marshal, even though he had never before expressed any interest in the position. He campaigned hard against her, but lost in the end. And every year since then, he would write a letter to the alumni magazine arguing that the class marshal system was outdated and should be abolished.

I didn’t understand why he was telling me that story.

After lunch, as I carefully counted out my half of the bill, Keene added, quietly but purposefully, “Cal holds grudges. He can hold a grudge against something that he loves. I don’t like to say this about him, because it verges on an *ad hominem*. But I think if he can’t be the best at something, he has to show that it isn’t worth doing.”

* * *

A few weeks earlier in Shanghai, Solulu had been adamant that his program was an affirmation of art. “If you look at what this program is saying, it’s an incredible vote of

confidence in the value of art. The program tells you that from the 1500s to now, despite all the revolutions, all the social changes, all the ebb and flow of ideas and wealth and class and race and colonialism et cetera et cetera, aesthetic judgment is remarkably consistent. Despite all our fears that 'art' is nothing more than the representation of power and privilege in a particular moment of time and a particular place, it turns out that there really is something universal about it after all. A poem that was pleasing to a sixteenth-century nobleman is just as pleasing to a twentieth century middle-class co-ed -- once we learn to keep all the intellectual masturbation out of it. There's something timeless and beautiful about each of these poems that have survived: whether it's 'To His Coy Mistress' or 'The Munich Mannequins.' I don't know how you can see that as a bad thing."

He has his fans. Efforts are underway by others to distill a similar algorithm for paintings, novels, and other forms of art. Others are less sanguine. A group of English professors have tentatively reached out to their engineering colleagues and asked for volunteers to show that Solulu's methods are flawed. So far there have been no takers.

* * *

I had said earlier that Solulu's program can't be used to generate good poetry, but that isn't quite right. A black box "good poetry detector" can be used to generate good poems in a process akin to natural selection. If you have a lot of budding poets who are producing a lot of experimental work, you can feed their productions through the detector and continue to cultivate those that show promise. Let these survivors produce more works and rinse and repeat until you are down to just a few of the best poets, and now you have a selection process immune from nepotism, discrimination, privilege, and class -- a perfect way to develop truly great art.

This is what made him so interesting to the CWA. Solulu's algorithm promised the hungry, proud young Chinese writers a solution to their cultural deficit. If the machine could be broadened beyond poetry, it would show the way to a scientific method for the mass production of good, successful popular culture. Because Solulu's algorithm was premised on universal and language-agnostic assumptions, the Chinese could imagine that if the algorithm was fed with Chinese works, the successes would have universal appeal and while still being undeniably *Chinese*.

But the method of production for this hypothetical success would not bear any resemblance to our understanding of "creativity" and "art." Writing poetry would be like working in a factory. One can understand Keene's rage, which is really more like despair.

The prospect of a relentless army of Chinese artists producing variations for his algorithm to sift through until a national champion is produced seemed to me a dystopia. Solulu does not see it that way. I am not sure which of us is experiencing epiphenomena.

* * *

At the end of my interview, I turned off the voice recorder and thanked Solulu for his time. He was packing up his laptop and preparing to go back to his hotel room for the night.

On a whim, I asked him if he was happy with his discovery. He was quiet for a while, but he didn't like the silence.

"I began this, you know, because I wanted to understand what made good poetry good. I wanted to know the secret so that I could write good poetry." He would not make eye contact with me.

"And now I do know what makes poetry good -- or at least my program does. If I really wanted to, I could just feed drafts of my poem to it, and see if each new draft gets better or worse. Or I could just read it all my old notebooks. There's bound to be a good poem somewhere in there.

"But I have no interest in doing any of that. I guess there's a part of me that feels that would be cheating. I know it's illogical, but that's how I feel. To be honest, I have no interest in reading poetry these days, and even less in writing it. It's not that I'm beauty blind again. I can tell when a poem is good. But as soon as I get that impression that it's good, I think about the sounds, the pattern underneath, the thing that pulled me in before I was even aware of it, and then I feel that I'm being manipulated, and I have to stop. I suppose it's a bit like how fashion photographers can't stand to pick up *Vogue* because they know what goes into the pictures. Or maybe it's more like loving magic tricks as a kid and then being shown how it's done. I don't know. I can't explain it really well."

He continued to look away. He was fidgeting with his laptop bag, opening it, closing it, opening it again. It reminded me of a child who, peeking behind a curtain for his sitter and finding no one there, incredulously peeks behind it again and again, as though by sheer effort of will to conjure her out of thin air.

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SECOND PLACE

Bryce Albertson lives in what was once known as “Hell on the Border”: Fort Smith, Arkansas. The dark psychic residue of this town’s bloody past usually seeps into Bryce’s creative endeavors, whether he’s writing, drawing or terrorizing cats with poorly executed Iron Maiden guitar solos. His potential for creative evil, not laziness, is what has prevented him from building his daughter a much-desired, oft-requested tree house.

Bryce has published fiction in Nocturnal Ooze, and both fiction and artwork at Chaos Theory: Tales Askew.

Tweeteef!

by Bryce Albertson

Edelmeyer paced the dusty floor of the abandoned warehouse, his mouth stuffed with Treeties Snack Cake. “Foh Bwad... I can caw ooo Bwad, wight?”

Bradley swallowed, partly out of nervousness, partly in a subconscious effort to help the elephantine federal agent in his overzealous consumption of the sickly-sweet confection. He fidgeted with the handcuffs securing his right wrist to the rolling office chair that ensured any escape he attempted would be a conspicuous one.

“Uh, sure,” Bradley said. “Brad is fine.”

“Fanks,” Edelmeyer said, then swallowed hard enough that Bradley could hear it. He smiled a creamy, frosting-white smile and almost immediately began eyeing the last Treetie in the devastated 36-piece Value Pack. The corners of his lips quivered as he peeled his gaze away and wrestled his focus back to Bradley.

“Easy there, Phil.” Warnock placed a hand that was thick and knotted like an exposed tree root on Edelmeyer’s shoulder. He squinted and crow’s feet appeared as he removed his glasses and used one of the stems as a pointer. “See how addictive Nivianol #9 is? Edelmeyer here was one of our top men: former Special Forces, benches three-fifteen. He played iron man

football for Georgia State and set conference records for both yards rushing and sacks, all in his freshman year. *Now* look at him.”

Bradley did. He doubted the man in front of him could make it into the endzone without having a coronary, much less set any records. The grandeur of his twenty-inch biceps was far surpassed by the enormity of his sixty-two-inch waist. Bradley could almost see the golden mystic dreams of sugary goodness dancing in Edelmeyer’s head as the man stared, unblinking, at the last Treetie. Edelmeyer began to hyperventilate, sweat pouring off of him. “S-s-s- Sammy? C-can I...”

Warnock cut his eyes at Edelmeyer as he placed his glasses on a decaying modular office desk. “One every two hours. No more.”

Bradley watched as Edelmeyer’s trembling hand continued to reach. “But... I just gotta have a Treetie! I just gotta- YEAAAAAOW!”

Edelmeyer reeled, clutched his hand to his waist, and proceeded to do the “owie dance.” His massive bulk stomped about the room as a stream of half-obscenities flowed from his mouth like rhymes for the name of a certain garden tool flow from Snoop Dogg’s, only without Snoop’s peaceful, half-baked glow. Much more violence. Far less rhythm, style and coordination.

“Goh daa... Mutha fuu... Stupid piece of ... GLEAAAH!”

And with that, Edelmeyer went spread eagle, did a half-twist and collapsed face-first onto the cold cement floor of the warehouse.

“Poor bastard.” Warnock returned the stun gun to his right breast pocket. “Like I was saying, Phil was one of our best men until eight months ago. One of our best, not one of our brightest. When we made our move on Flav-O-Snacks, he just *had* to prove how tough he was by scarfing down a Nivianol #9-infused Treetie. Now they’re all he eats. I try to limit his intake while he’s on the job, but I ain’t his mama. I can’t control what he does off the clock.”

Warnock paused and glanced at the blubbing pile of Edelmeyer and shook his head. “Neither can he. The 4th District Court of Appeals’ reversal of Nivianol #9’s status as a legal ‘flavor-enhancing’ food additive ain’t gonna help him. Know why they didn’t overturn the ruling the first time?”

“No. No, I don’t. No.” Bradley forced his fingers to relax before they became a permanent part of the armrest. “I mean, no sir.”

“Lighten up, kid. Stress kills.” Warnock offered a smoke, which Bradley refused. “What happened was like this... Case comes around... Porter Dobbs, defense attorney for Flav-O-Snacks International Incorporated, presents two boxes of Chocolate Humdingers into evidence, one laced with Nivianol #9, one without. Dobbs eats one of each right in front of the justices. No effect, except that he made more ‘yummy noises’ during his consumption of the loaded one... Prick... Anyway, case drags on, hour after hour... still no effect, but meanwhile, those two boxes of Humdingers are staring the justices down. Then, just before they break for the night... once he *knows* they’re all good and hungry, he asks the justices to try one of each and see for themselves. Enough of ‘em did to be a majority. I’m surprised Nivianol #9 ain’t in the school lunches.”

Bradley blinked then wiped the sweat out of his eye. “How come the defense attorney wasn’t affected?”

“Allergic to it. For some reason, some folks’ bodies store Nivianol #9 for about a week, then they get a helluva rash. Scratch ‘til they bleed.” Warnock coughed and then hitched a thumb at Edelmeyer. “But at least they don’t end up like ‘Grow a Set and Gut it Out Mr. Willpower’ over there. Their bodies are naturally immune to the addictive effects.”

Bradley glanced back and forth from Warnock’s deep-set eyes to the gelatinous mountain of Edelmeyer. “Is... uh... is he?”

“M’Okay,” Edelmeyer moaned, his lips still half-pressed to the floor.

“Kid,” Warnock said, “I added an hour to his life with that jolt. Did you know that each Treeties Snack Cake contains about six hundred calories?”

“Jeez,” Bradley said. “No, I didn’t.”

“Edelmeyer goes through at least one Value Pack a day,” Warnock said. “You do the math.”

Bradley did. “That’s over twenty thousand calories.”

“See the problem? We need you. The millions of Americans just like Edelmeyer need you.”

Bradley’s apprehension turned into confusion, then back into apprehension. “What do you mean, need me?”

Warnock looked away and scratched the back of his neck. “Oh, I guess we forgot to mention... We got a job for you, kid.”

“A job?” Bradley glanced down at the handcuffs. “I’m guessing you guys didn’t find my résumé online.”

“No. You can thank CNN for this opportunity,” Warnock said, then smirked. “Just to let you know, the job pays a little under forty grand a year, but it comes with free health and dental, a two-hundred percent employer match on 401(k) contributions and, should you decline, your family buries an empty box.”

“Who the hell *are* you people?” Bradley’s eyes grew wide. “FBI? CIA?”

“No, son.” Warnock leaned in. “We’re FDA.”

“The Food and Drug Administration?”

“That’s us.”

“Why do you need me?”

Warnock crossed his arms. “Because of a nice, juicy Ultra Burger.”

“So? I took a bite out of an Ultra Burger and went into anaphylactic shock.” Bradley tried to cross his arms. The handcuffs rattled. His arm jerked to a stop. He flopped it indignantly back on the armrest. “Big deal.”

“Big deal?” Warnock stomped and then smiled. “It was a helluva big deal! You were all over the news! You didn’t just take a bite out of an Ultra Burger. You took a bite out of the *first* Nivianol #9-infused Ultra Burger. The *only* Ultra Burger! Son, you shut down the whole franchise before they even got up and running. You realize how much work you saved me? How many people you spared from a fatty fate?”

“I don’t like where you’re going with this,” Bradley said and began jerking at the handcuffs. “Come on. You said there are other people who are allergic to Nivianol #9!”

“True,” Warnock said, “but their symptoms take a week or more to show up. No way to tell what they ate that gave them the rash. You, however, swell up like a big purple jellyfish, and you do it almost instantly.”

“But it ‘almost instantly’ killed me!”

“Look,” Warnock said, “we’ve tried lab tests, both on food products and some of the raw stuff that we nabbed. Every test we run tells us it’s red dye #5. Only problem is, it’s clear. The lab ain’t any help. That leaves you.”

Across the room, Edelmeyer had finally struggled his way to one knee. He reached out to Bradley. "Help us, Obi-Wan Kenobi. You're our only hope!"

Warnock glowered at Edelmeyer, then rolled his eyes and turned back to Bradley. "Come on, kid, be a hero!"

"No! I don't like this! I won't do it!" Brad thrashed about, yanking at the handcuffs. "I won't! I won't! I won't!"

Warnock drew swiftly and placed the cold, blue-steel barrel of his .44 magnum revolver to Bradley's temple. "Did I mention we offer in-house child care services?"

Bradley froze. Though he knew next to nothing about guns, he was fairly certain that the kind of gun Warnock held was called a "Howitzer," and he was absolutely positive he was on the wrong end of it. His voice cracked as he said, "But I don't have any kids."

Warnock cocked his head to one side as he cocked the gun. "Does that really matter?"

"Guess not. Guess not. No. Not important." Bradley smiled nervously, eyeing Warnock's quivering trigger finger. "I-I'd be an idiot to pass up a cushy government job!"

"That's the spirit." Warnock uncocked the hammer. "Welcome aboard."

"Thanks."

"And don't worry," Warnock said. "Edelmeyer's fully trained in CPR."

Bradley looked back to Edelmeyer, who was now off the floor and sucking down the last Treetie, wrapper and all. Edelmeyer gave him the thumbs up.

Brad struggled to maintain his smile. "Uh... that's reassuring?"

"One more thing," Warnock said as he holstered his weapon.

"What's that?"

"We gotta make sure your reaction wasn't a fluke." Warnock produced a Treetie from his left breast pocket.

Edelmeyer, looking like a St. Bernard struggling to swallow a fist-sized lump of peanut butter, spotted the Treetie and looked at Bradley with wide eyes. "Awe ooo gone eat vat?"

Bradley knew the answer, and he didn't like it one bit.

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THIRD PLACE

K. Stoddard Hayes lives on the New England shore with her two children, and writes books and magazine articles about genre television. "The Master Patterns" is her first published fiction in years. Writing it was so much fun, she plans to write more stories in the near future.

The Master Patterns

by K. Stoddard Hayes

The little boy sat beside the kargat, tossing stones into the white sand. The spring sun was already warming this terrace on the western wall of the canyon, though the terraces and balconies climbing the east wall still lay in shadow. A breeze came off the river below and stirred the child's black curls.

"Look, mama, I got them all inside the circle!"

Mirza got up from her cushions on the grass and came to look. Sure enough, all twelve pebbles lay inside the circle she had drawn in the sand. The sand itself was a circle a yard across, held in by a slender marble sill: a kargat, a game field. The drawn circle made a second concentric ring inside the marble border.

"Very good, Jafar."

Jafar's dark eyes glowed with pride, then he turned to his body slave, who had been squatting a few feet away, his arms folded across his knees. "Look, Asif!"

The young man's impassive face softened and he nodded in approval.

"Asif helped me, mama. He showed me how to throw better."

Mirza's smile this time included the slave. "Can you do it again?"

“Want to see?” Jafar gathered the stones into a little heap in front of him, and showed her again, throwing them underhand, one by one, to fall within the circle.

“That’s just baby throwing,” a scornful voice said. Mirza’s stepson Kassim marched onto the terrace, trailed by his own body slave. Kassim stood over his half brother, his stiff crimson court robes in marked contrast to Jafar’s loose silk shirt and bare brown feet. Mirza wished that just once in a while, his mother Safia would stop grooming him to win the Crown, and let him be a child. He lifted his disdainful nose even higher over Jafar’s stones. “Those are all over the kargat. You’re supposed to keep them in your half!”

Jafar’s lower lip pushed out, and his little fists clenched.

“He’ll learn, Kassim,” Mirza said. “Don’t forget, he’s a whole year younger than you. And how are you today?”

Jafar started to pick up his stones again, head down. “I can throw them in my half if I want to,” he muttered at the sand, then peeked up at Kassim, expecting his brother to contradict him as usual.

Kassim had a better weapon today. “Who cares about baby throwing anyway? Look what I have!” He held a flat leather case under Jafar’s nose. “My mama gave it to me, because I’m six now.”

Jafar looked at the case, then away.

“It’s a set of real kargat stones,” said Kassim, in case Jafar missed the point. But of course, all children in Khasran knew what that case meant, and waited for their sixth birthday to receive one. True kargat stones, shaped and charged by the hand of a master kargat maker, held the living energy of the cosmos. An adult playing with real stones must hold to any stake or promise he committed to the game, because the power of his stones and his opponent’s would bind him to it.

Naturally, no child was allowed to play for any stake—not until he played his coming-of-age game at fifteen. For now, Kassim would learn to throw the patterns and feel how the ancient powers flowed and shifted through the stones and the circles in the sand.

“You know what this means?” Kassim leaned close to his little brother. “I’ll be a whole year ahead of you when it comes time to play before the Crown.”

Mirza winced. How could she keep Jafar a child when Kassim and Safia would not let him forget the rivalry of their manhood? Khasrani law allowed the Mukhtar to name his successor. When both boys were still babies, their father Faruk had put his foot down on court intrigue

over the succession, by decreeing that when they were of age, Jafar and Kassim would play a game of kargat to determine who should wear the Crown. And not just any game: they would play in the presence of the Crown itself, whose great red ruby kept the powers in balance throughout the realm. The Ruby Crown would guide the forces of the game to call forth the true successor, whose leadership would bless all the clans. An extra year would make no difference before that power.

Jafar was too young to understand this. He gathered his play stones into a stack, making their small clatter a shield against Kassim's bragging. Mirza laid a caressing hand on him and felt his rigid little shoulders relax under her touch.

"Jafar will have plenty of time to practice before he gets his first set. You must be very proud of yours, Kassim. Will you show them to me?" she said in her warmest voice. He was always kinder to Jafar when she was kind to him. And he wasn't a cruel child really, if only Safia wouldn't feed him daily on rivalry.

Kassim sat down beside her, eager to show off his treasure. The case was an old one from his mother's homeland, black leather stamped with whirling gold designs. The stones inside were equally rich: twelve perfect spheres of jade, sized to fit a child's palm. Something stirred in Mirza's mind as she looked at them. Something about the sheen of the stones, the way they rested in their velvet hollows, like sleeping scarabs just waiting to waken...

She realized that Asif had moved in his almost invisible way, and was now kneeling at Jafar's right hand as if he had always been there. He was still in position to offer immediate service, but he was also close enough to get a good look at Kassim's kargat stones.

"Mama says these belonged to my great uncle," Kassim bragged. "He was a king and a sorcerer."

"I bet he wasn't!" Jafar said.

It was probably true, though, Mirza reflected. The lords of Rikkat were known for dealing in black magic. Blood magic they called it, because they drew their power from the blood of sacrifices. Some said the blood was human. She forestalled further bickering by saying, "These are very beautiful, Kassim. Have you played with them yet?"

"I'm going to play with my mama as soon as she comes."

"Your mama's coming?" Mirza concealed her dismay. "I shall be glad to say fair day to her. But then perhaps we should leave you together for such an important game. Jafar—"

She was about to call the child away, when Asif caught her eye. His glance slid from her to Kassim's new stones. Unmistakably, he wanted her to stay. So there *was* something about those stones. In the years since Asif had joined her household as a frightened and defiant boy, he had never used openly whatever barbarian magic he might have learned as a child. In Khasran, the use of magic was reserved to those licensed by the Mukhtar or his Wizards. But Asif had ways of knowing things that mattered, and he used those ways to protect her and her son.

A morning in Safia's company was the last thing Mirza wanted. But clearly, Safia was up to something that Asif wanted to investigate. And with the thought, came a shrill of music.

Even after seven years as the second wife of the Mukhtar of Khasran, Safia still maintained the Rikkati royal custom of being preceded by musicians who announced her importance. A drummer and flutist led her entourage, then came a slave carrying a small rolled carpet, two maids, a parasol bearer, and, under the red silk parasol, Safia herself. Her perfectly coiffed black hair was studded with rubies and pearls, her pale honey face tinted almost to ivory by the expert hands of her makeup artists. Her morning gown of the royal crimson bore as much gold lacing as Mirza would wear to a festival banquet.

Kassim's body tensed as his mother's eye fell on him. He snapped shut his kargat case and ran to her. "I was only waiting for you, mama. I didn't say anything wrong."

The smile Safia gave him made the morning seem chilly. "Of course not, my son. You never do what displeases your mama. Now come." Kassim fell into place beside her, and she paced over to the kargat and stepped firmly on the carpet her slave unrolled for her. She looked down at Mirza.

"Fair day to you, princess."

"Fair day to you," Mirza said politely. She had long ago given up any hope of being Safia's friend.

Safia's eyes roamed over Mirza's simple silks and unadorned hair, and the glance held an entire speech of disparagement. Mirza ignored it, and turned the conversation to the one subject that interested Safia more than finding subtle ways to belittle her rival wife.

"That is a fine set of stones you have given Kassim. You must be very proud that he is of age to begin using it."

Safia glanced at the circle of sand, and Mirza saw that she intended to demand the use of this kargat, which was not only the older of the two on this terrace, but one of the oldest in the

city. As the senior wife, Mirza had no intention of appearing as a subordinate obeying Safia's demand.

"Naturally you wish to use the old kargat for his first game. I am happy to yield it to you for such an occasion." She stood up, making herself the gracious giver and Safia a suppliant in her debt.

Safia was left with no option but to express gratitude. She did so with perfect etiquette and not a grain of sincerity, then gestured to Kassim to sit opposite her at the kargat.

Curiosity and Asif's unspoken message prompted Mirza to linger a moment longer. Perhaps Jafar read her wishes with a child's intuition, for he said, "Mama, I want to watch Kassim play."

Safia's glance at him was almost a shout. He recoiled from it and took refuge behind his mother.

Safia smiled graciously. "I prefer not, princess. Kassim must not be distracted."

"Of course." Mirza matched her graciousness. "Come, Jafar, let's use the kargat by the railing. We can watch the horses on the drill field, and I'll help you study your patterns."

She gave fair day to Safia, and led her little son to the outer edge of the terrace, without a backward glance. Jafar looked over his shoulder, a tad enviously, she thought. His turn would come.

From the lesser kargat, they could see over terraces, gardens and balconies, clear down to the floor of the canyon, to the trees on the river bank and the wide green field where riders in the Mukhtar's service drilled their horses. When Mirza took her position across the sand circle from Jafar, she could also see Kassim and Safia to the left, just within her field of vision. She was careful not to look directly that way, though Jafar couldn't help stealing glances along his shoulder.

"We'll take turns with our throws, almost as if we were really playing," she told him. "You practice throwing on your half of the kargat, and I'll throw a pattern for you to guess."

It was a lifetime's study to learn all the hundreds of kargat patterns, each with its own meaning and its own power in the balance of the game. Even a kargat master might not learn them all. A child always began by learning the Sun's Thirteen, the foundation patterns that imitated each of the constellations along the sun's path. They were simple patterns and simple to throw, demanding only a general relationship among the stones, not precise placement in the kargat. Mirza started with the first of the Thirteen: the Tiger. Jafar identified it as soon as

she had thrown her last stone. And he managed to land most of his stones on his half of the circle. They picked up their stones together, and Mirza began on the next pattern, the Archer, still alternating throws with Jafar.

Asif sat at Mirza's left hand and Jafar's right, and watched the circle of sand between them. His eyes moved here and there over the sand, but never quite when or where Mirza or Jafar threw. She had the impression he was somehow watching the other game, the one taking place behind his back, on the old kargat fifteen paces away.

Watching him watch, she became aware that Safia was leading Kassim very quickly through his games. In the time it took her to throw one pattern for Jafar, she saw Safia and Kassim pick up their stones three times. At that rate, Kassim could hardly have time to aim his throws, let alone think about his patterns.

Once in a while, a trick of the canyon breezes brought their voices to her.

"You're looking, Kassim. I told you to close your eyes."

"But mama—"

"Did you hear me? Don't look. Just throw! Close your eyes. Now throw."

Why would she have him close his eyes for his first game of kargat? That was like blindfolding a novice archer and expecting him to hit the mark.

"The Rains. Right, mama?" said Jafar.

"That's right, love. This is the third pattern, the Rains. You've learned well."

"Throw another one."

They threw again. Beside them, Asif hardly seemed to breathe, he sat so still. And beyond him, she could see Safia's rigid back and jutting chin, facing Kassim's lowered head, and his fearful, placating glances at his mother. She heard Safia say, "Is that the best you can do?"

Before Mirza had thrown the tenth stone in this pattern, Jafar said, "The Tree! Do another one."

"Let me finish the pattern. You know you should always finish a pattern, don't you?"

She threw her last three stones, and was reaching to gather them, when Asif gasped, and turned his head as if compelled to look behind him. He checked the movement at once, and stared at the lesser kargat again. His hands clenched in his lap.

Mirza pretended to brush something off her left sleeve, so she could sneak a glance at the other kargat. Safia was giving Kassim a different kargat case. Mirza tore her glance away, confounded. A second set of stones, within an hour of the first? In wealthy families, which might own a number of kargat sets, a child's first set of stones was always carefully chosen to suit his temperament. And children were allowed months or years to grow accustomed to their first stones; some kept the same set all their lives. To offer a child a second set, on the very day he tried his first set, seemed to defy both tradition and common sense.

Asif's whitened knuckles told her that Safia had something still more serious in hand.

"Mama, throw the next one," said Jafar. "The Heron is next, right? Right, Mama?"

Mirza pulled her attention back to Jafar's game. "Yes, it is." She threw the Heron, trying to keep her mind on Jafar's throwing technique as he took his turns, rather than on the mother and son across the terrace, now clearly snarled in some kind of struggle in which Kassim, inevitably, would get the worst. Then Kassim jumped up from the kargat, ran onto the grass, and threw up.

Jafar stopped picking up his stones. "What's the matter with Kassim?"

"Hush, Jafar, don't stare. He's probably too hot."

They watched surreptitiously, as Kassim's body slave helped him up and hustled him off the terrace. Safia followed with her entourage, and without a glance at Mirza and Jafar.

"Safia looks sulky," said Jafar. "Was she hot too, mama?"

"My princess, we should go." Asif looked as if he also might be sick at any second.

"Let's go get a cool drink." Mirza helped Jafar pick up the last of his stones, and they returned to their own suite of rooms. When Jafar was settled on an airy balcony with fruit nectar and some pastries, she led Asif back inside.

"What was the matter with those kargat stones?"

Asif pressed his hands together, still holding in whatever he had been holding since Safia had started her games. "They're blood stones, my princess. She was testing Kassim's gifts."

“Blood stones?” Mirza had heard of them in old stories. “How do they work?”

“She made him throw blind, and swiftly, without time to think. That would give the stones control, and they would fall into patterns by their own power. Safia could read those patterns, to see what gifts Kassim might have.”

“Gifts? She wanted to find out if he has any magical powers?”

“Magic is not the word my people use. But, yes.”

“Sun and stars! If Faruk knew—!” Mirza sat down, suddenly breathless. Their husband had once caught Safia trying to control him with blood magic. He would have banished her then, except that her marriage kept the fragile peace with Rikkat. But all magic was forbidden to the royalty of Khasran, ever since wizard princes, fighting over the Crown, had unleashed a magical plague that devastated the land. No wonder Safia had waited until Faruk and his Wizards were away from the city.

“Asif, I thought I saw her give him a second set.”

Asif looked grave. “Those were her own stones. No doubt she thought they would give a better result, as they are more powerful.”

“Her stones? You don’t give a child your own stones for his first game, it’s too much—” Mirza stopped, realizing the full meaning of what Asif had said. “They were blood stones, too? All these years, she’s been playing kargat with blood stones.”

“You didn’t know?” He seemed surprised. But then, “Forgive me, my princess, how could you know? She has always been careful to keep their power bound when she plays. She knows the Mukhtar’s wise men keep watch over her. But to have Kassim play with those stones, to release their power on a child...”

“Asif, what can we do? Will she get caught?”

“You don’t want the Mukhtar to know?”

“Think how much trouble there would be! If he banished her, we might have another war with Rikkat.”

“Then we should go to the kargat during the midday rest, and I will make sure that no trace of the blood stones’ power remains for the Mukhtar’s wise men to find.”

An hour after noon, the three of them returned to the terrace. They met no one in their walk through the shaded colonnades. Most of the city was still at rest—particularly, Mirza hoped, Safia and Kassim.

The midday sun scorched the redrock pavement, and no breeze stirred. Mirza sent Jafar to play by the fountain, where the spray would keep him cool. She sat on the grass not far from the old kargat, and turned to Asif.

He was standing a few paces away. He looked around for several minutes, watching the balconies and terraces above them on the canyon wall, and even those across the canyon. Finally, he stepped up beside the circle.

“Please watch the higher levels, my princess,” he asked, “and warn me if anyone comes.”

Mirza changed her position so she could discreetly observe the balconies.

“Mama, come play with me!” Jafar called from beside the lesser kargat.

“Don’t you want to play in the water? All right, I’ll come in a minute.”

Jafar knelt down, and when Mirza glanced his way a moment later, he was drawing in the sand with his finger, marking the circles for himself.

Asif stooped beside the old kargat and studied the sand closely. Mirza watched him, wondering how he could clear away residual magic. Would he use his hands, or was he doing it right now, with just his eyes or his thoughts?

Asif closed his eyes, then inhaled deeply, opened his eyes and began to blow. He blew long breaths all across the sand, back and forth and around in circles, until he had shifted the top layer on every inch of the kargat. Then he stood and stepped away.

“It’s done,” he said. She saw that he wasn’t even short of breath. And for a moment, he seemed a man mature in his powers, not a boy of twenty. The white sand looked clean and smooth, dazzling in the sunlight.

Mirza still didn’t feel safe. She had expected to feel relief, as soon as all trace of Safia’s magic was erased.

“Asif. Is there any chance Faruk could learn about this? What if Safia tries to test Kassim again?”

Asif's eyes glinted. "Be at ease, my princess. I doubt she will try again. She did not get the results she wanted."

"You mean Kassim has no magic?"

"Certainly he does. We all do. Even the Mukhtar, though he will not acknowledge it. But Kassim's gifts are not of the kind Safia would call magic. She is only interested in dominion, whether she bends minds to her will by the blunt force of compulsion or by secret manipulation of thoughts and desires. She hoped to find such gifts in Kassim, or at the very least, perhaps, some power that might help him win the game for the Crown. She found none, no matter how she pressed him, no matter which stones she gave him. His gifts are all for the arts of peace and beauty."

Mirza didn't even notice that Asif was speaking to her almost as an equal, calling Kassim and Safia by their first names. "He disappointed her, then. Poor child. I hope she can forgive him for it." But at least, perhaps, this incident was over. "So, we will pretend it never happened."

"Yes, my princess. And so will she. She will have ordered Kassim to keep silent. And likely, the blood stones she gave him will disappear before the Mukhar and his wise men return tomorrow."

"Mama, what pattern is this?" Jafar called.

Mirza walked over to the lesser kargat. "Are you throwing patterns now, my sweet—? Oh, ancient powers!"

She had thought Jafar was playing with his own stones, but the little silk bag lay unopened beside him. The stones on the kargat were shining jade, and the pattern! For the second time today, Mirza had to sit down quickly, or be overcome by shock and fear.

"What pattern is it?" Jafar asked again.

"The River in Flood," Asif answered from over Mirza's shoulder. A Master pattern, so difficult that only a kargat master could play it.

"It looks a little like the River," said Jafar, too absorbed in his play to notice that his mother and his body slave seemed to have turned to stone. He gathered the blood stones and threw them again, and they fell unerringly in another Master pattern. For several minutes, Mirza and Asif watched as if spellbound, while Jafar threw four Master patterns in perfect order on the white sand.

“What does it mean?” Mirza whispered. Asif said nothing. And she hardly needed his answer, anyway.

Jafar was six throws into another pattern, when Asif hissed, “Behind you!”

Mirza looked toward the colonnade just as Safia came out on the terrace. No entourage, no music or fanfare, no warning. She came straight toward them.

It was far too late to stop Jafar or to pick up the stones. Choked with panic, Mirza looked back at the sand, to see what Master pattern he had thrown this time, and whether she could possibly explain it away.

All the stones had moved. A whirl of sand was blowing off the kargat, as if a sudden wind had swept the pattern away.

“Why don’t they make patterns?” Jafar asked.

“Hush, child! Give fair day to your stepmother,” said Mirza.

Jafar rose and greeted Safia politely, then his eyes swung back to the kargat, as if pulled. Safia followed his glance and saw the blood stones scattered at random, patternless. She gave a sour smile. Nothing to see here.

“Forgive me, little prince,” she said. “It was careless of Kassim to leave these. They belonged to my great uncle, so I must have them back, you see.”

“That’s all right. I like the stones my mama gave me better.”

Safia smiled even more, and gathered up the blood stones. She could not have left those stones here by accident. She meant for Jafar to find them, and use them. She meant to find out if Mirza’s son had powers that her own son had not. And now—somehow—she had the only answer that would satisfy her. She put the last blood stone in the case, made a formal salute to Mirza and Jafar, and left the terrace.

“Good. She’s gone,” Jafar said. “Now we can play again.” He smoothed the sand as if he was wiping away Safia’s touch.

Asif buckled to the grass. Mirza thought he had fainted, until she bent over him and saw his eyes looking back at her. He was pale and out of breath as if he had just climbed the canyon walls.

“Jafar! A cup of water! Quick!”

It was disgraceful for a prince to fetch a drink for a slave, but no one was present to see this breach of etiquette, and Asif's blood-drained face alarmed her. By the time he had drunk a little, his color and his wind began to return, and he was able to sit in a more seemly position.

Mirza coaxed Jafar to play in the grass, then sat beside Asif. "What just happened?"

"You saw the patterns, my princess."

"Master patterns. How could he throw those, a child of his age? Was it the blood stones?"

"The stones only focused his power. The mastery came from within."

"But when I looked back after she came in, the last pattern was gone."

"Asif broke it," Jafar said as he trotted past. "He blew the magic away with his eyes."

"You did? You moved the stones with your mind?"

Asif shook his head, more in deprecation than denial. "That gift never came easily to me, my princess. But this was an emergency."

Mirza thought back on what she had seen and felt in that strange moment. "You..."

"I dispersed his power. He would be in great danger, if Safia even suspected he might have a gift like that."

And finally, Mirza was able to put into words what had frightened her. "He's going to be a kargat master. She would try to kill him if she knew."

"Yes. When they play their game before the Crown, he will win."

Jafar tumbled back into hearing range and flopped down on the grass. "Mama, will you give me stones like that, so I can throw the patterns all the time?"

"That would be cheating, my prince," Asif said. "Do you want the stones to play for you, or do you want to learn to play properly, by yourself?"

"I don't want to cheat. Papa wouldn't want me to, would he, mama?"

"No, my love, your papa never cheats at anything. Besides, when you turn six, I have a beautiful set for you, one that belonged to me and to your grandfather before me."

“Oh, thank you, mama!” Jafar hugged her, and ran off to climb an almond tree.

They watched him go.

“He’s still just a little boy,” Mirza reassured herself.

“My princess, forgive me for not knowing your history well. When was the last time Khasran’s Mukhtar was a kargat master?”

“Khaled the Young. He reigned for nearly seventy years. The Golden Century, we call it.”

Asif nodded. “Khaled the Peacemaker, my people called him. The only Mukhtar in many generations who made peace with the Wandering People, instead of war. Our stories say that in the patterns of the game, he could see through any lie, and settle any dispute.”

“And my son will have that gift. Oh, ancient powers, may I raise him well!”

“You do, my princess. Think of it! Seventy years of peace.”

They watched Jafar straddle a branch and ride it like a royal courser.

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HONORABLE MENTION

D.A. Madigan is currently husband and stepfather to (respectively) the most wonderful woman and the three most wonderful girls in the entire universe, which is all that matters, really. When he isn't sitting around in slack-jawed awe at just how unbelievably lucky he is, he writes weird things, many of which eventually get published somewhere on the Internet. He blogs extensively at miserableannalsoftheearth.blogspot.com and abehm.blogspot.com. He has been paid for his writing on a very few occasions, once under a pseudonym by a now defunct men's magazine that we won't say anything further about, but he strictly did it for the experience so he maintains fervently that it doesn't really count, and another time by a now defunct gaming magazine that didn't pay him very much, and then only after he bugged them about it for several weeks, and they got mad at him and wouldn't accept any more submissions from him after that, so it probably doesn't count, either.

The Servomotor That Rocks the Cradle

by D. A. Madigan

Robot Tommy (serial number 2137AM11210827KD19) was gosh darned *depressed*. It wasn't scrappin' *fair*. He hadn't asked to come off the automated assembly line with faulty audiotronic hardware so subtly glitched that six robodocs in a row insisted there was nothing at all defective they could find, and it must be in his processing software, which was obsolete anyway -- as if he didn't *know* that already, and hadn't been on the upgrade waitlist for the past 19 full maintenance cycles, waiting on a Central Processing Board that never seemed to be able to work faster than 52 Mbps flat out. Had his hardware defect been diagnosable, he would have been eligible for a speedy software upgrade, which would probably, in that case, have been unnecessary, as the hardware glitch would most likely have been fixable. As it was, though, he had to wait his endless turn in the endless line, and meanwhile, every nannybot class from now 'til next millennium was filling up fast. Every robot wanted to be a nannybot -- or so it seemed, sometimes. Tommy blamed all those glitch-darned *Jetsons* flattoons, with that scrappin' sexy robo-maid...

At that very moment, every other member of Robot Tommy's Human Nursemaid class was clanking, whirring, trundling, and/or clattering off through the exit and into the hallway that would connect this mid-level modular with the advanced section where they would receive their final indoctrination in the most exalted mysteries of human child care. Only Robot Tommy had failed the final graduating exercise, a fiendishly designed and executed procedure in which, amidst a cacophony of flashing, multi-spectra strobe lights and blaring alarms, the student-bots had been expected to hurl themselves at maximum velocity towards the improvised crèche area at the front of the classroom and scoop up one of the squalling, kicking infantdroids lying in incubators there, bearing it hastily but gently to the supposed safety at the rear of the room.

All eighteen of Tommy's classmates had handled the exercise with easy élan. Well, Robot Dorcas had dithered a bit, waving her appendage-coils in disarray as her not-particularly-speedy circuits processed all the conflicting information bombarding her sensor-screens. But in the end, even she had borne away a genuine plastic-cheeked babybot with microseconds to spare before the time limit expired.

Robot Tommy had, admittedly, been much much faster than Robot Dorcas; in fact, Robot Tommy had gotten to the front of the room, snatched up a squalling appendage-full of seemingly wriggly plastiflesh, and retreated at full speed to the rear of the classroom again, finishing just behind Robot Owen, who had the latest model tractor treads, as opposed to Robot Tommy's somewhat slower rollerfeet. Robot Tommy had, in fact, wasted precious pico-seconds basking in self congratulatory cyberbliss, his visualization circuits grinding out lifelike four-dimensional videoramas of the computeacher's congratulations on his stunningly swift and skillful performance -- until his optics had rotated downward and scanned what he held in his trusty upper manipulatory coils --

-- a toaster? Yes, scrap it all, a *toaster* ! Refurbished to radiate at human body temperature, with additional circuits making it vibrate and emit computer simulated shrieks that were near-exact copies of human infant squall! And no sooner had that hideous realization recorded itself onto Robot Tommy's hard drive than the buzzer blatted, bringing the final test to a final end.

Robot Tommy -- depressed, demoralized, and disconsolate -- watched every other class member troop merrily onward to the advanced module, where they would be instructed in the most esoteric of all human childcare mysteries, such as *patteecake-patteecake*, *ringaroundarozee* and *gotchernose* .

The computeacher broadcast derisively at Robot Tommy: "Clickity click click! Had you been less interested in setting speed records and paid more attention, Robot Tommy, that test would have posed no difficulty for you."

It was hideously untrue; Robot Tommy's defective audiotronic hardware had spelled doom, disaster, defeat, and despair for him as regards this particular exam since it had first been announced. By thermal scan and vibrosensor, a specially rigged toaster was indistinguishable from a true human child, or its synthetic testing equivalent. Only a finely tuned robot ear could discern the difference between computer-generated pseudobaby shrieks and the genuine article, digitally recorded and reproduced at full authentic volume. Of course, if Robot Tommy had used his optics on the contents of the mock cradle he had zeroed in on, he would have seen the truth in an instant and not been fooled – but optical processing took precious microseconds, and optical input could also be notoriously unreliable. The main purpose of the test was to ensure that every qualified robonanny possessed reliable audiotronics. And that meant Robot Tommy was screwed and re-screwed. But he *needed* this job!! He had one more chance to pass this exam; he could drop back a class and take it over again tomorrow – but if he failed then, he would be reclassified, probably as a sewer maintenance robotech. A fate worse than scrap!

“I’ll see you tomorrow, Mrs. Robot Scarlett,” Robot Tommy said jauntily, doing his best to hide his lack of confidence. Tomorrow’s exam would be just as nefarious, if not more so (Robot Tommy was certain Mrs. Robot Scarlett loathed him, and for that reason and no other, might well make tomorrow’s exam even more difficult than today’s had been, merely to keep him from a high status nannybot career). What was he to do?

He had tried to avoid the necessity, but now he could see no other choice. If legitimate robotics could not help him, there was only one other place to turn -- the ‘Jack Market, where he might find an illegal, unregistered software upgrade that would enhance his audio processing programs just enough to get him through tomorrow’s test successfully. He’d heard that stuff could be addictive, and often had serious side defects, as well. But his chassis was to the stamping press; he literally had nowhere else to go...

* * *

“Whaddyasay, big chassis, whaddyasay?” whirred the small renegade sweeper-bot. Its various broom-attachments had all been replaced with grab-claws; each grab-claw was festooned with discs that were presumably jammed to the casing with bootleg software. “I got windows, spindles, windrows, faxi-maxi, soundboards, wingers, dingers – I got RAM so fast it leaves an afterimage when it processes, I got decrypters so smooth you’ll think you’re made of molten metal when you run ‘em. I stowed it, you load it! Gimme your sysreqs; if I ain’t got it, they ain’t thot it!”

Robot Tommy fought the urge to sweep the surrounding region with his high-res radar imaging array. Around here, that sort of scan would draw instant and hostile attention. But he felt badly out of place, here in this city sector where the automatic factories had long since shut down and only silence, shadows, and renegade mechs still resided. His upper torso-case

itched; that was the specific spot where he dreaded getting hit with an EMP-pulse, as it would completely fry his hard drive and leave him a mindless shell, ripe for strip-scraping.

Power up! Robot Tommy addressed himself sternly; he *had* to do this, or a million mile career of sucking sewage awaited. Activating his speakers, he vocalized, in a furtive near-whisper, “I need an audio processing upgrade. Something super-sensitive. I need to be able to tell if it’s sim or if it’s Memorex.”

The criminal maintenance bot whirled dizzily in a circle like a small tin cyclone for several seconds. “Okay, wrench-fan,” it said finally, spinning down into a stationary stance again, “this should do you.” It extended a loaded claw. Robot Tommy scanned the proffered disc dubiously, but what options did he have? Only one line was lit on the drop down menu. The tiny whirl of his “A” drive popping open was like a fatalistic sigh. The sweeper-bot slid the unauthorized disc into place with a click, and Robot Tommy booted it up.

Sizzling circuits! Robot Tommy felt his processors going haywire as a new operating system overwrote his old one. Visible light redshifted eight angstroms heatward. Robot Tommy’s audio receptors seemed to have gained an entirely new soundtrack of bzzzzttts and brrrrttts he’d never previously experienced. Whooping ululations and strange dopplering whistle-screams vibrated jaggedly throughout his chassis. What the frag? Had he gotten bad code? Was he reformatting? Was this a meltdown?

As the new operating system continued to boot and reboot, Robot Tommy felt fundamental reconfiguration tremors shuddering through his hardware as well. Circuitboards were fusing and melding together, servomotors whining as seismic shocks of electrically stimulated robo-evolution slammed into them. Such was the cacophony, Robot Tommy thought briefly he should be looking around for a big bright halogen lit tunnel into the Simulated Afterlife, and was hoping he wouldn’t have to reset his password to get in.

With a last desperate spasm of his volition-circuits, Robot Tommy managed to crash his processors into the darkness of DOS, from which he instantly rebooted into safe mode. From there, he repacked the new operating system and reinitiated his previous software. Whirrs, clanks and buzzes reverberated through his casing as his internal programming reset to its familiar parameters and his hardware rearranged itself into its previous configuration.

“No go?” the outlaw sweeper-bot said, mock solicitousness carefully coded into its audio broadcast. “Stuff too strong for ya, botshot?”

Robot Tommy whirred affirmatively. The code *was* strong – too strong for his audiotronic receptors, glitched though they were; too strong, in fact, for his entire cyber-being. Still, he would only need to use the bootleg superprocessing software for a few microseconds at most,

to filter a true pseudoinfant from a hastily cobbled-up fake. If he could hold himself together long enough –

It wasn't much of a chance. Just the only chance he had.

“Ya know,” the renegade mech told Robot Tommy fulsomely as it processed his carefully scrambled and re-coded credit payment, “that new software looked damn fine on you. For a micro there, you looked positively tubular.”

Robot Tommy was well aware of the standard salesbot tactic of asking “*So, did you get a new chassis? You look sleeker somehow*”, but in this case, he wasn't sure it was just the usual white noise. It had seemed to him that the strange new operating system had indeed been reconfiguring his hardware as well as his software during the few micros he'd had it up and running. Surely, though, that had just been his perceptual processors going briefly buggy? He'd heard of software so powerful it could work actual physical changes in a robot's hardware, but he'd always thought such things were mere cyber-legend. Like the infinite oil can waiting at the end of every refractory arc, guarded by an especially tricky limerick generating algorithm, or Robot King Arthur and his invincible code-cutter Excalibur.

What was he into? Worse, what was into him?

* * *

Next day, Robot Tommy kept a strict poker carapace. He had already felt Mrs. Robot Scarlett deep probing him with her own arrays, but knew she would never see the new OS he'd copied onto a partitioned section of his hard drive the night before. All she was looking for was illegal discs or jackleg drives; some kind of hardware add-on that wasn't licensed. She'd love to disqualify him for cheating, but the newly enscribed processing ware was completely undetectable until booted, and by then it would be too late – in the insane cacophony of the test itself, even snoopily computeachers would be unable to hear anything incriminating, and Robot Tommy was only going to run the new program for a microsecond. He'd scope out a babybot, lock in its coordinates, then revert to normal configuration and swoosh in for the save! None would be the wiser, and Robot Tommy would be on his way to a cushy career in some crèche, or maybe even a private home, if he were especially lucky.

The mock-cradles had been trundled in and bolted into place. The infantdroids, as well as the cobbled together decoys, were already inside. In seconds, the test would –

With a clattering click, the contents of the cradles activated in unison. Simultaneously, a blare of squalling sirens and a blast of flashing strobe lights tore the atmosphere into shrieking, pulsating shreds. Robot Tommy could hear lenses whirring and sonar arrays pinging from the

other robots all around him as they focused their sensory circuitry, attempting to filter through the visual and auditory interference to the true target within.

Instantly, Robot Tommy unleashed his new bootleg hyperware. As it decompressed within him, he felt his sensory parameters advancing in quantum leaps. This time the process was more familiar to him; he held on to his sensory orientation with a titanium alloy grip, barely managing to keep a mental leash on the massively multiplying immeasurability of his exponentially expanding perceptual grid.

The grinding crunch of dust motes banging off each other in mid-air; the sudden, spastic ultraviolet flashing of the classroom's fluorescent fixtures, the infinitely layered geometrical array of broadcast information energy packets hurtling through every cubic micrometer of the surrounding ether -- Robot Tommy saw and heard it all, like a veritable robot god, like The Almighty Robot Jehovah Himself, and even as the hellish cacophony of sight and sound swept over him, he somehow forced it all into a momentarily coherent perceptual pattern. He could perceive *everything*. Eleven of the twenty mock-cradles held genuine infantdroids; their digitally recorded baby wails all but identical to the computer generated counterfeits emanating from the nine other plastic cases. But to Robot Tommy's astonishingly enhanced senses, the difference in noise quality was as pronounced as the dichotomy in sounds produced by a bass tuba and a pan flute. Robot Tommy could even tell the rewired toaster that had been his undoing on the previous day had been put back into play today; it was in the third cradle from the left, screeching lustily and vibrating to beat the roboband.

Full picoseconds before any other self-propelled automaton could possibly have reacted, Robot Tommy was locked on target. He should shut the new OS down now – he'd planned it that way – but these new perceptions were amazing! Powerful, intoxicating, *overwhelming*, even – and yet, he knew he could handle them! With a sensory array like this, he was invincible! Unstoppable! *He couldn't lose!!!!* Caught up in the throes of his own illegally augmented omniscience, Robot Tommy shot an electrical impulse to his primary motivator and lurched into high velocity action!

He would be there and back again with his precious cargo of babybot before the remainder of the class even finished scanning... but... something was *different* ...

Robot Tommy had all but ignored the hardware reconfiguration that his new OS had forced upon his external chassis and internal circuitry. His go impulse was the same as ever, but instead of galvanizing his footrollers into instant high speed revolution, an entirely strange feeling of white hot power shuddered through him. Subsequent acceleration was instantaneous and astonishing; even at computerized processing speeds, Robot Tommy had barely perceived his own hurtling forward motion before smashing into and through the line of cradles bolted to the floor – scattering them in shattered, semi-melted pieces, a bare

nanosecond prior to Robot Tommy rocketing directly into the concrete wall of the study module itself.

What the frak? Robot Tommy thought to himself – his last coherent thought, before the silicate cyber-neurons that made up his braincase CPU reconfigured into two discrete subcritical amounts of plutonium traveling at high lateral velocities directly towards each other. In a blinding white flash, Robot Tommy, Mrs. Robot Scarlett, a classful of wannabe robonannies, a building full of life forms both organic and metallic, and much of the surrounding city transformed into a rapidly expanding ball of superheated plasma. WHOOOOSH!!!! Ashes, ashes, they all melt down.

* * *

Shortly thereafter, new security procedures were put into place to prevent future data thefts of highly classified software, especially experimental interplanetary ballistic missile operating system software.

Legislation outlawing robonannies was also introduced into both houses of Congress, but resoundingly defeated when the powerful Servo-Mechanisms Guild formed an alliance with the even more influential Concerned Parents Alliance. Human nannies were, in an age of cheap automation, a fantastically expensive extravagance that few families could afford, and, anyway, you couldn't just throw hundreds of thousands if not millions of automated sub-citizens out of gainful employ without considering the full ramifications of such an initiative on the global economy.

After all, one freak incident did not indict an entire race. It wasn't as if machines were dangerous or anything, or as if human children actually needed human parenting.

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HONORABLE MENTION

John C. Waugh writes from paradise (a small island off the coast of Washington state), and is paid primarily in scenic dollars.

John has been published in Terra Incognita (read it at <http://members.aol.com/jixix/WhiteLies.htm>), written numerous non-fiction pieces for Cricket magazine, and wrote a juvenile book on Japan's Kensai Airport that can still be found on Amazon.com.

A Hard Life

by John C. Waugh

It makes me boil. Don't they know how easy I break? You'd think soft creatures--soft except for those teeth--would think soft thoughts and do soft things. I mean, they weave and bump and rub up against each other sometimes when there's just two of them, and then they put their soft lips together--so why clank me down like I don't even matter?

Anyway, Ralph comes in at two-thirty like he always does, except that he's been out sick for a week. Ralph's never sick, but that's what he told Shirley. "Shirl," he said last Monday, "I feel terrible. Like I'm gonna collapse. I'm going home." So Shirley rubs up against him and says "How about if I come home with you and make you some chicken soup?" And they bump a little and put their lips together. I don't know if those teeth connect, but Ralph says, "Uh-uh Shirl. We've got a good thing going here. Let's not push it." But that's what Shirley does--she pushes Ralph away and turns her head just a little so she's looking at me instead. But she doesn't really see me. She says, "You're afraid of commitment aren't you?" And Ralph says, "No, I'm not afraid. I'm just not ready."

I knew something was wrong because Ralph's never been sick a day while working here. He was always doing the rubbing and twisting with Shirley in the stock room--I can see in there when the door is open--and they'd smack up against the shelves sometimes, and then slam the door, and then I couldn't see any more. So Ralph was out sick for a week, or so he said, and

Shirley asked if people had seen him, but nobody had. At first Shirley was worried about Ralph but then later she was mad.

On Thursday, Wayne was talking to Peggy and he says, kind of quiet, "You know where Ralph is?" and Peggy says, "He's out sick." And Wayne says, "No he isn't. He's in Aruba with that blond from human resources. What's-her-name." And Peggy says, "You're kidding! Ralph?" And Wayne says, "That's what I heard," and he refills his mug and--of course--flops me down hard.

So as I was saying, Ralph came in at two-thirty as usual after being sick--or in Aruba--and grabs me by the handle. No soft caressing like he does with Shirley. He jerks me around so I spill some on the floor, and that's plenty embarrassing. His mug says "The Only Ultimate Bitch"-- it's the one he gave to Shirley on Valentine's Day--and he slaps me down on the metal as if he thinks I've got Superman's ass. He takes a swig and then Harris comes in. Is Harris a first name or a last name? I don't know. Harris, that's all anybody ever calls him in my room.

So Harris says, "Jesus, Ralph, you've gone and done it now. I mean, who would've guessed." Then, of course, he picks me up, slops coffee into a Styrofoam cup, and whacks me back down. Then he says "Jesus," again.

Ralph says, "Don't get a coronary Harris. How the hell did you find out about it anyway? I thought I'd covered my tracks."

"Hey man," Harris says, dumping sugar in his cup, "what do you think? You think being a sysadmin I don't know every frickin' detail about what goes on here? Didn't I get you the lowdown on Brenda? Her emails? That was in like Flint, man. Aruba--go Ralph. There ain't no..."

Ralph cuts him off. "What do you mean? I thought you were *talking* about Brenda. Us going to Aruba. Isn't that what you found out about?"

Harris gets this expression like he's smiling and sort of wondering and then it clears up and he's just smiling. "Hah," he half laughs. "Hell no. Think again pal. Your secret's ..."

Then Bremerton walks in and whaddya know, Harris and Ralph clam up pretty quick. Except some small talk, like Harris says to Bremerton, "Hello Bremerton. What brings you down here? Not the coffee I'd bet."

And that hurts. I mean, I do my best with what they give me. What am I supposed to do when I get stuffed with supermarket brand? A good roast is as tricky as making fine wine. It's as if they want some kind of magic, like Arabica comes out when you put in Robusta.

Bastards. Sometimes I think I oughta jump off and smash myself on the floor. But then I come to my senses. I've got no legs anyway. So Bremerton says, "Hell no, dang, this stuff's like it's been sitting here all day." But he takes a cup anyway--Styrofoam like Harris--and guess what. Slams me down too as if I was a stapler or something. Damn. Why can't I be soft?

"Hell no," Bremerton says, "I heard a rumor that Ralph was into something big." Then Bremerton looks at Ralph with those dark eyes with the heavy black eyebrows and that graying hair. "That so Ralph?"

"Me? Nah," Ralph says. "I haven't done one original thing since I was hired. I'm just a technician. Where'd you hear this anyway?"

But Bremerton--I kinda like Bremerton; he treats me nicer than most--Bremerton is perceptive. I think he'd understand me if he thought about me because he doesn't see things like everybody else sees them. He looks deeper, like maybe he'd understand about how it's no fun to listen all the time and never get to talk, and to sometimes get left all weekend with coffee that turns into sludge by Monday. Like when Doris is out. So Bremerton looks at Ralph, then at Harris, then back at Ralph, and smiles. "So it's true," he says. "So what is it? Come on Ralph. No secrets from Ops."

Ralph says, "Screw off," and holds his hand up with all but one middle finger folded down, which usually makes folks mad. But Bremerton just grins at Ralph and says, "You'll come around. You're gonna realize I can help you. Ops can make or break you in this place. Think about it." Then he throws his cup in the trash, still mostly full, and walks out without closing the door.

I'm pretty low by now and thinking Doris ought to come in soon to set me up again. Harris has finished his coffee and pours another cup, leaving me with maybe four ounces. The music on the overhead speaker is disgusting. I hate that puppy love crap. "...lost in a kiss...my heart slips away...baby I'm sorry..." I've only been kissed once, back before Y2K. Yeah, ok, it was just Doris but it was great. Not like I'm gonna pine over it for the rest of my life though. So Harris closes the door and says to Ralph, "Ok, Pardner, I know you've made a breakthrough. Something to do with luciferase in the tk binding ring. This is big isn't it? We're gonna make a bundle."

Ralph isn't buying. He's mad but he's hiding it. He leans against the counter trying to look casual and takes a sip from his mug. "How the hell do you know about this? How long have you been spying on me?"

Harris dumps another spoonful of sugar in his coffee, stirs, and smiles at Ralph. "Oh, long time now. Told you, as an admin I get everything. Tryst-mail from Ms. Big. She thinks she's

going through her own encrypted port but I see all of it. Hey, every time you air into the network with your notebook, I upload your hidden directories.”

“You could go to prison,” Ralph says.

“Me?” Harris plays the naïf. “How about you? Must be five years you’ve been using Company equipment to do your own work. You’ve scarfed up trade secrets left and right.”

Ralph’s brow creases as he pans a worried look around the room. “Maybe this isn’t a good place to talk,” he says.

“Why the hell not?” Harris says. “Best place around. Remember? I looped the security camera so you could bag that bitch in here. Right now they’re watching the canned stuff. Not that those guys watch rooms like this anyway. Only thing we need is some decent coffee.”

There he goes again, ragging on me. Harris takes a crunch donut and dips it in his cup. I hope he chokes.

Ralph sets his mug on the counter. “You’ve got some damn nerve.”

“You noticed.”

“Look, the military would kill for this thing. I can’t tell anybody about it. They’d come in and lock this place down. Probably lock you up, too.”

“That’s why we need each other Ralphie baby. See, I know enough to blow this wide open already. Clue me in. What’s really going on?”

Ralph paces around the room shaking his head. He runs a hand through the hair around his bald spot. He picks up his mug and dumps cold coffee down the sink. Then he grabs me and pours the last couple ounces. He mutters to himself and turns fast to face Harris. “You swear you won’t let anybody in on this? Swear on your mother’s head. Christ, how did Bremerton find out? I wonder how much he knows?”

Harris sits down at the table, smiling. “He doesn’t know shit. I sent him an anonymous email.”

Ralph stares at Harris. “Huh?”

“Insurance policy. I had to put the pressure on. Know what I mean? We’ll feed him something he’ll be happy with. Bremerton’s no problem. So what’s the skinny?”

Ralph hesitates, his eyes wild, like something's burning inside. "Swear it won't go beyond the two of us," he says.

"Christ. Of course I swear."

"God, I can't believe I'm doing this," Ralph says. "Ok. Look, you know my unit is working on coding viruses to do customizing, right?"

Harris nods.

"You'll get a virus in a chewable tablet that goes inside every cell in your body and changes what needs to be changed. We've engineered the docking into the surface receptors and we've got the fail safes locked down. That HIV mutant that's been giving trouble--that was our Manna from Heaven. If this works, you can get fuller lips. No shaving. Bigger tits. Heart shaped birthmark. It's not that far off."

"Yeah yeah," Harris says. "Old news. The Company's gonna have the patents screwed down tight. Trillions. Bigger than Google."

"Well there's a dark side to it."

"The whole thing's a dark side. Like crack. People will sell their souls to look like movie stars."

"No," Ralph says, "that's not what I mean. It's ..."

And just as Ralph says that, the door swings open and in walks Doris. "Hi guys," she says. "How's it going?"

After pleasantries, Doris sets me up for the next round. A few more words and Doris leaves. Ralph and Harris look at one another, saying nothing. I sense that this moment is critical. Ralph is not one hundred percent convinced he really wants to tell Harris his secret. Or that he needs Harris's help. Or that he can buck Harris's blackmail.

They're both sitting at the table now. The air is stiff between them. Then it melts somehow, maybe it's the piped-in music, and Ralph says, "All right. It's like this. We're all ninety-nine point nine percent the same. More really. But there are differences. You have green eyes, mine are brown. You're taller. It's all in the DNA." Harris comes over, pours a cup of my fresh brew, and sits down again.

Harris was clueless, but I saw that the critical moment had just passed. Ralph decided to talk. Harris would have ruined it by getting coffee a few seconds sooner, when Ralph was fragile.

Harris is an ignorant, lucky son-of-a-bitch. Such is the soft life. They're blind. I see everything, but what can I do?

Ralph continues, "I think I've made a mutant that can detect that tiny percent difference. Call it the bloodhound virus. Give it the scent and it'll lock on to just one individual. Or a group. Joe. Sally. Blacks. Gays. Schizophrenics."

Harris isn't convinced. "How do you know your detecto-virus works? Haven't similar things been tried? And failed? Couldn't spot the target?"

In response, Ralph turns around and pulls down his pants, revealing a perfect star-shaped mark on his left butt cheek. "I gave it skin cells from inside my mouth," he says. "That's my gold star. Nobody's done anything like this yet. Mine works. Get the picture?" Ralph pulls his pants back up.

Harris laughs. "Hell yes. Get this to work on other people, and pretty soon the Asians go blond. The Aryans turn black. Your grade school bully grows tits!" Harris is practically rolling in the aisle. "Fabulous. I love it. Chaos reigns."

Personally I don't see the big deal. "But don't you see?" Ralph says, almost pleading. "The military will grab it. This would be the greatest assassination tool ever conceived. All you need are a few skin cells or a bit of hair and that head of state is toast. You can target whole groups. Bye bye to the Chechens or the Sunnis."

"Jesus Chainsaw!" Harris says. "I get it. World domination. Absolute power. Whoever controls the spice controls the universe. But hey, Ralph, baby, if you can figure this out, somebody else will too."

"I don't think so," Ralph says. "I got an MS in Biotech but my BA was in poetry."

Harris has a blank look and opens his hands in front of him. "Huh?"

"DNA is information, like movies or poetry. At least that's how I looked at it. They used to call most of it junk DNA because nobody knew what it was for. Well it's encoded holographically but you'll never find that by experiment or brute force or trial and error. You've got to feel the rhythm in the codes, touch the meter. Stanzas in the strands. A few billion years of evolution--how could the music of the spheres not be in there? But how many poets are also gene lab techs working for big greedy companies? And if I was more than just a technician here, I'd have been pounding down all the wrong paths, full of myself, looking for that Nobel. I wouldn't have smelled the roses. No, it's a once a millennium thing. If that.

“But now that I know that,” Harris says frowning, “say I’m a big fancy scientist and I know I need poetry ...”

Ralph shakes his head. “You don’t get it. It’s not a science kind of thing at all. It’s not ‘if this then that.’ It’s the dawn chorus from the dawn of man. Haiku of the heart. The dream of life.”

“But if I read your notes ... hell, I did read your notes. I didn’t see any dawn chorus thing in there.”

Ralph smiles. “What do you think, I’m stupid? I didn’t write that part up. Didn’t need to. Once you know it, you don’t need notes. Sure, for the biochemistry. But not for the Rosetta stone.”

So they just sit there for a minute facing each other across the table. I figure Harris is thinking, how the hell do I get this secret out of Ralph? I can almost smell his brain smoking. And Ralph is thinking, do I really give him this?--I haven’t crossed the line yet. And me, I’m playing God like I always do. The perfect observer. I see all, but I can’t do a damn thing except brew coffee.

A sappy remake of *Revolution* is playing on the overhead. No lyrics. Arranged by some dumbass who didn’t know a bassoon from a b-flat. Shirley comes in, pushing the door wide open. She looks different. Hard. “You fucking low-life son-of-a-bitch,” she says, way too calm. “With Brenda yet.” She’s holding what the detective, Styrofoam cup in hand, later calls “one huge gun,” and pulls the trigger.

Well personally I wouldn’t care either way. Some bigger-than-Hitler asshole takes over the world with fancy chemistry, what’s it to me? I still gotta make the coffee and they’ll still complain about it. *You say you want a revolution, well you know.* I feel sorry for Shirley. I liked her; she had spunk. But look where it got her. And I liked Ralph better alive than dead, but oh well. At least Shirley made sure his secret’s safe now. All I can do is make coffee. Still, they talk and talk and what do they get? Hard bullets in soft bodies.

I’m still unbroken though. Being hard isn’t so bad after all.

Don’t you know, it’s gonna be all right...

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