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I’ve tried to recreate events contained in the afterwords (The stories behind the stories) to the best of my ability, given my memories, records, and the internet.
For Emily Barlow

who lit the fire when she was here.
Introduction: There is no Introduction

-Matthew Sanborn Smith
December, 2018
The boxes at the grocery store all called out “Buy me!” But I chose you, little wallflower, even though I don’t know how you’ll taste.
Rubble People

The local Partyville starts to peel apart around us: the booth, the ball pit, a video game and the netting between them, the pizza on the table, and the table too. Shards of pressboard and plastic fly toward me while molding themselves into the form of a man. A couple of the other moms scream, and their kids run to them. I didn't expect this, but I know what it is.

"It's David!" I shout at them. "It's just David!" I look at Lainey, three years old today and so much tougher than the adults behind her. She's seen this before. Whatever party we might have had is in a shambles now. But I don't care. David's here.

"Look, honey, Daddy's accumulating!" I say.

When they see Lainey and me standing our ground, the others calm down a little, but Gina and Dara still scoop their kids up and head for the door, sprinkling f-words like holy water. Marie's backed into a corner with little Farrah in her arms. Farrah's tiny face is splotched pink and shiny wet. Her mouth hangs open. Marie's does the same. They're too afraid to come over, too curious to leave. I feel a little bad (because everybody kicked in for the party) but not too bad, because they're being stupid.

David has finally come together. "I wanted to see my little girl on her birthday," he says. I pick up Lainey and the two of us hug this weird conglomeration of a man. I kiss David's pepperoni lips, taste his grease with a flick of my tongue. The broad orange booth tabletop is his chest and its base is one of his legs. He's got plastic balls from the ball pit and a sound card voice box from a videogame. He kisses Lainey, who laughs and wipes her hand in the new grease on her face.

"It's so good to see you, baby," I tell him. It is good, but it takes all I have to not cry on him. I don't want to waste the little bit of time we have together by bringing him down. It's my job to hold everything up. I'm not doing my job very well.

"You too, babe," David says. "I only have a minute before they look in on me again."

"Daddy, it's my birfday!" Lainey says.

"I know it's your birthday, honey! That's why I'm here. Damn, you're gettin' big!"

Lainey sticks her hand into her father's face and tastes it.

"I'm sorry, David," I say.
“For what?” he asks in his chiptune voice.

“For having fun sometimes. For being happy. For smiling. I feel guilty when you're over there, fighting.”

I can almost make out the memory of his cheekbones in his pizza crust face. He says, “But I want you to do all that, Beth. I want you to have a good life. That's what I'm fighting for. I want you to show this girl she can have a good life even if some other people can’t.”

“Which other people?” For a second, I wonder if he's talking about his buddies' husbands and wives.


The decision bursts out of me. I finally hit send on the projection unit in my head, but it isn't the courage that's been sitting there since I had it installed a few months ago that I pull out of myself. The transfer is P2P: psyche to psyche. The unit facilitates by making us hallucinate our own icons to manipulate. I feel a thick thread worming its way out of my left eyeball, one from my left nostril, one from my left ear. They weave themselves together and I yank at the cord. It feels like I've torn a piece of my brain out along with it. I don't think it was supposed to work like that.

I've reached in and taken out the impulses, the memories, the ghosts of the neural nets that make up my compassion and my caring. I force them on him, plastering the sticky thing to the table bolt that punctures the orange formica and forms David’s nipple. And then it’s a part of him as if it always had been.

He leans back for a moment, like I shoved him. “Oh,” he says, surprised. His salt and pepper cap eyes leak salt and pepper tears.

“Jesus, you shouldn't have done that, baby. You know I can't give that back.” He grabs me tight in his plywood arms, the hard materials of his body somehow feeling softer when he squeezes them into me. He feels warmer, that's for sure. But I care less.

“I had to do something,” I say. “I need for something to change. I need you to change and me and this whole goddamned situation. I've had enough of this.”

“Jesus, I'm sorry.”

“It's not your fault. It's someone else's. I'm sorry. I'm doing this all wrong. I didn't mean to—”

“We'll do something,” he says, and kisses us both. “We'll work this out. I gotta go now. I love you guys.”
When he's gone, I sit in the wreckage of the booth, in the pile of junk that used to be a table and a lot of other things, and also used to be my husband. Without the table to cover me, I can see my belly popping out from below the hem of my Goodbye Kitty T-shirt. White. Fat. Ugly. My outie gross as ever, like a curling pigtail that got squashed trying to escape.

The manager comes over. He says, “You're gonna have to pay for this.”

I look him straight in the eye, not giving a fuck about him or what he wants. “Here,” I say. I throw one of the balls from the ball pit at him. He takes it in his gut like it's a medicine ball. “You didn't have the balls to come over when my husband was here. See if you've got the balls to make me.”

***

David remoted himself to the moon once. He didn't tell anyone but me. He doesn't think anyone else has ever done it. I look up at it sometimes, especially when it's full, and I think about him. Once, not long ago, a man made of moonrock walked on the surface up there, shuffling off gray dust. David might be the only one in the world who can go that far. I always knew he was special. He's incredible. And I'm lucky.

I couldn't even have kids before David. My parents died when I was young, and I was sterilized at the orphanage. I met David before he enlisted, and we talked about adopting. After he joined up, he found out a way to give me a maybe baby. It was a trick he learned in the army. On his second leave, he reached into me with that spirit part of himself, his radio flesh is what he calls it. While we were having sex, he reached into my womb and accumulated the tiniest part of me. He touched millions of cells. Chances were good one of them would be enough like an egg to take. It did. It wasn't enough like an egg to give me a completely healthy baby, but the doctors fixed that. I'm so grateful for Lainey.

David sneaks over sometimes, like at Partyville. He's not supposed to. He can get into a lot of trouble if he gets caught, but the minders turn the other way for a few minutes now and then. He figures they know that remotes need a little contact to keep from killing civilians outside of the designated war zone. There have been too many incidents involving the Formosa Strait vets. The minders don't seem as bothered about the civilians inside the zone, though.

On our side, the Turks and the Ozzies get the worst of it because they use real people. Their soldiers are tanked up like Iron Man, flesh and blood inside. But really, the worst side to be on is no side. David never wants to talk about fighting, but once in a while, when he's saddest, he'll slip and mention the kids or the women or the old people. Then he just falls apart.
I hold him, whatever body he's in.

I'll have to remember the way I do that for next time, so it feels right to him and maybe he'll forget my emotional amputation. The mutilations underneath the skin are easier to hide. In the short term, anyway.

I wonder, if there are ever astronauts again, if they might find what looks like a shattered statue of a man while they're on the moon. They'd freak. I wonder if he could go to the sun. I wonder if someday people will kill each other in those places, too.

***

I can't fucking deal with this anymore. I shouldn't have to. I wipe Lainey's red, running nose and the snot pouring over her lip. I have to call out again because daycare won't take her sick. I'm gonna get fired, I know I am, and David doesn't make enough to keep us going by himself. I'm letting the month-overdue rent slide, so I can make the month-overdue car payment. I can't drive the house, but we can sleep in the car.

Lainey's screaming and miserable. I hold her against my old Bruins sweatshirt, pat her back, step around the toys on the floor and into the fruit punch stains on the carpet. She won't go down to sleep. She's got a fever and even if I had the gas money to get to the walk-in clinic, I couldn't afford the co-pay. I put a cold washcloth on her forehead and give her a second Flintstone chewable. I don't know what else to do. A sick baby eats you.

Even though I gave David my compassion, I still know I'm supposed to feel for Lainey. I know I'm supposed to take care of her. I'm trying to do what a person who feels what they're supposed to feel would do. I'm doing what I think I would have done a week ago in this situation. It feels strange. I had the projection unit installed in my head months ago during the war drive at the recruitment center because it got us $30.00 a month more on our EBT chip. We could've gotten more if I actually used the damned thing the way the army wants me to.

With the civilian units, we can't remote like soldiers do, just project pieces of our personalities. We can't get back what we send like soldiers do. I chickened out before the first send. What I projected into David at Partyville was the first emotion I ever gave away.

The army wants our determination, our positive attitudes. They want our courage. I'm afraid to give my courage. The ones who gave it wound up giving more than they expected. I'd seen other people, David's dad for one, give his courage for the war drive and then live in fear about everything that came down. He gave away his car, thinking it was a deathtrap. He gave away his sleep and can hardly function anymore.
I wish there was someone I could give my worry to. I wish there was someone I could give my fear to. This poverty. No one wants any of it. Not even the enemy would be stupid enough to take it.

I find twelve dollars in an envelope I was supposed to pay back to Gina, but I didn't see Gina on Tuesday like I was supposed to. She's being a bitch, still freaked out over David showing up at Partyville. But I'm glad she's being a bitch because twelve dollars is something. Add that to the money I scrape up from behind the crumb-covered cushions, from the sticky cup holder in the car, from the bottom of my pocketbook, from Lainey's glass penny jar, and I come up with fifteen dollars and thirty-eight cents. I can find something for Lainey in the cold and flu aisle at Sav-A-Lot for fifteen dollars and thirty-eight cents. I know I can. I have to.

***

In the store, Lainey's griping on my shoulder. She wants to be held everywhere we go. The most expensive stuff, anywhere in the store, is always on the shelf at eye level. I don't even know what's up there anymore. My eyes automatically go to the bottom shelf. I've been shopping the bottom shelf for a year and a half.

The cheapest thing they have is $16.99, a tiny bottle of some generic cherry-flavored cough syrup. It's made for adults. I read the bottle again. It says not to be taken by children under twelve, but it doesn't say why. Maybe if I just give her a quarter of a teaspoon, it'll knock her out. I pace the speckled tiles of the cold and flu aisle with Aaron Neville singing overhead on the PA system and I wonder if the cough syrup would hurt her. And if I decide it won't, how do I come up with three more dollars? Lainey screams in my ear and I look for a woman, because a mother should understand.

Two aisles over, it's a woman with dyed brown hair and curls the size of soup cans. She's in a long fuzzy coat, pushing a cart, and checking out the corn pads. “Ma'am, could you help me, please? My baby's sick and I just need three more dollars to get her some medicine.”

She sighs, a little huffy, but there's no denying Lainey's a restless mess. She goes into her pocketbook, and I don't care if it's a hassle for her. I'm closer every minute to doing whatever it takes to get by. The world has kicked me around enough.

“Hold up!” comes a voice from behind me. I turn and see Gianni in his Sav-A-Lot vest. Shit. Gianni, the most vile human being I know, is out on the sales floor.

Gianni couldn't get into the army. Psychic deformity. He couldn't accumulate, couldn't function even in a supporting role, much less combat. He felt guilt over that. Dara said he tried to kill himself. Ran his electric car in the garage hoping to die from
carbon monoxide poisoning. We used to call psychic deformity “stupid” when I was little. Now he's a fucking disaster with a name tag.

“Ma'am, please put your money away. I apologize. We have rules against begging.” His finger's in my face. “You're coming back to the office,” he says to me.

Idiot Gianni grabs the arm I'm holding Lainey with and she almost tumbles to the floor. The lady says, “Oh!” and reaches her hands toward her. I catch Lainey with my other arm, the one that was waiting for those three dollars.

“What the fuck, Gianni! You almost made me drop her!”

I jerk the arm he has upward to hit him in the face, but he pulls back, and I only catch the end of his nose. He slams his open hand into my head and I knock skulls with Lainey.

“Hey, stop it!” The lady screams. Her hands are up, half to grab at us, and half to stop any fists flying at her. Lainey is outright crying.

“What the hell is going on here?” Gianni's boss, big Steve Arden, is pulling Gianni off of me. I know it's smart to pull back and act innocent, but I can't help kicking him in the leg while he's still in reach. Gianni spits at me and lands one on my hoodie while a couple of other stock boys run in and try to hold his swinging arms. He's crying too, and screaming incoherently.

“He hit her!” the lady says.

“I'm so sorry, Beth,” Steve says to me, “You know the situation with Gianni.”

Yeah, I know the situation. Gianni gave his courage to the war drive and he gave his determination. He gave his good citizenship, he gave his driving skills, his rock-skipping ability, his knowledge of boiling water. He gave everything they would let him give because he wanted to give something. He wanted to give everything, but they don't want all of it, only the good things. He's left with everything that makes him human trash, all the shit no one would ever want, with the guilt that sold off everything else sitting right there on the top of the pile.

He can't even be the greeter at the Sav-A-Lot. But Steve, who went to school with David's cousin, can't fire Gianni. Says the government won't let him. Gianni's a war hero as far as they're concerned, even though he's never fired a shot. Or maybe part of him has now. Steve has to give him at least four hours a week.

“I don't care what the situation is,” I say to Steve, “That's assault and I want you to call the cops on him.”

Steve stands a little taller, like he hadn't thought of that. “I'll be more than happy to do that. Don't you worry about a thing. Do you need to see a doctor?”
My mind races. “Lainey does. Gianni knocked my head into hers. She might have a concussion.” I hope Steve doesn't think about it too hard and question if Lainey can even get a concussion. No, he's rattled, thank God. If not because of us, then because of this lady.

“All right, let me call 911, we'll fix this whole thing up. Are you all right, Ma'am?” he asks the lady.

“I'm fine. You need to fire that maniac.”

“I hope I can, Ma'am.”

“Thank you, Steve,” I say.

I never would have guessed Gianni would be the best thing that happened to me today.

***

David says the locals have different names for remote soldiers depending on where they're fighting. When they see action in the desert, they call them sand devils. In the cities they're called rubble people. I think about rubble people every time I give Lainey another vitamin: Barney, Betty, Bamm-Bamm. I think about David accumulating in the vitamin factory, a man made of sweet pastel chalk. I like to imagine that Lainey would get better if she could take a big bite of him like that.

He says he can feel himself while he moves between bodies. His buddies say he's imagining it. They travel at light speed from human body to accumulated body and back. They say there's not enough time to feel anything in between. He says he takes his time and feels it and I believe him. The only thing that keeps the others from trying it is fear. The fear of not being able to get back to their bodies.

But anything can be our bodies. The whole world can be our body. I think I want to do it, be out of my body. But for longer than a microsecond. I want to fly without any weight, knowing I could never be heavy enough to fall.

When our men and women come home, our boys and girls, the ones that are still alive aren't only human. They've collected pieces of the world inside them and become unrefined, like metal being turned back to ore. A remote might go out and become a tree walker in Indonesia, a jungle soldier made of vines and unlucky monkeys. And when she comes back to the base, a tiny bit of her real body changes. Maybe a few cells of a blood vessel wall turn to sap. And maybe she wonders where that bruise came from and how much of her is still her. This is the first war where wounds can add to a soldier's weight.
They wear their tree bark skin, their concrete joints, their iron wounds, and they like to think they're stronger for it.

I wonder what David's going to bring back inside himself. And what he might leave behind.

***

Lainey's been deleted.

I can't understand this. I can't believe this. I keep going over it to remind myself that it really has happened. My life hasn't quite synced with reality, I guess.

Her eyes look like something from a taxidermist's sample, only soft. I can still see them through the steel door. She looked like she was getting better since the emergency room. They gave her antibiotics, the fever seemed to be easing up. Then this morning she stopped.

I can't afford the emergency room like Sav-A-Lot can. I call the doctor who grew the brain she shouldn't have been born with. He says that in Poland there was a baby like Lainey who had a fever. Her brain overclocked and it wiped her mind clear.

I ask him, “Could Lainey's mind have gone somewhere else, like her father's does when he's remote?”

“There's been no evidence to show that's the case,” the doctor says. He sounds the same way I remember him. Gentle. Smart.

“Can you make another brain like her last one?

“We can actually salvage the brain she already has. That wouldn’t be the issue. The problem is we can't get her memories back. She’d be mentally like a newborn and the new connections and memories that formed in her brain would mean she'd be a different person, not the Lainey you knew. On top of that, I'm afraid Medicaid wouldn't cover the procedure.”

“If I could find Lanie's memories online or if her father can find them in North Africa, could you put them back?” The words sound crazier outside of my head than inside. His sigh rolls through the connection like a thick, tired fog.

“I think the best thing for you in this moment is to get some rest. I’m very sorry for your loss.”
There are no police. There's no medical examiner, there's no funeral home. As far as the law is concerned, Lainey was stillborn three years ago. I don't have the heart to bury my own little girl. I don't want her waking up trapped in a box under a ton of earth. I didn't know what else to do. Her body's in the kitchen freezer.

I press my face against the freezer door. I can't ever open it again. On the counter are the freezer shelf and the ice cube trays and a box of frozen peas and my favorite flavor of melting ice cream. My face is hot and swollen and wet. I'm babbling. Telling her things I'd planned to tell her when she was older. I'm not supposed to shake like this, am I? I'm not supposed to feel as much pain as I do. I guess compassion isn't exactly love. It isn't exactly that feeling you have when another person was your whole life, sick and all.

“Daddy went through me once, with his radio flesh,” I tell Lainey with my hand balling up against the door. I don't want her to be lonely in there. “That's how we made you. You were a miracle. Three years is more than I ever should have had with you, baby, and I'm so, so grateful for that. But am I greedy for wanting even more?”

There's nothing else to be done, but I keep standing here because what the hell else can I do? I haven't made a move in years that wasn't based around Lainey. Would I have tried harder if she was a real baby? I mean, she is a real baby. Was a real baby. Is there some maternal instinct I never got because she wasn't completely natural? Is there some part of me that would have done anything to recover her, even whored for the money, if she was like all the other kids? Is that the part I gave to David on Lainey's birthday?

For the first time ever, I hope David doesn't visit me. I can't be the one to tell him that his daughter is dead. He's going to blame me. I know he's going to blame me. I can't face that. I can't ever face him again. My whole life is fucked. It's all fucked. I think it always was. I was just too stupid to see it.

My eyes are burning. My face and the kitchen floor are wet. I have to get out. We used to go out all the time when David was here. We had more money then. I can't believe how many better days there used to be. I'm home more now. I have to go somewhere to just get away from the apartment and my life. To get away from the freezer.

I'm sorry, David. I didn't have what it takes to hold it together. I know I should admit I failed as a mother and as a wife and as a person, but, fuck, I'm sure I didn't fail. It was the world that failed me.

There are two ways this can go. Either way, it's the end. The one way, I can crumble. But I don't have what it takes to kill myself. I don't want to die, anyway. I want everything else to die. That's the other way. I can scratch at the eyes of God.

I'm going to go down to Second Street where the homeless lady with the cardboard sign hangs out on the corner and I'm going to give it all away to her, everything left that's good about me, just like Gianni did. Either Gianni is a real person and Lainey was a real baby and I was a real mother or none of that is true. I don't know which. I don't
know if it matters and I think I don't care. I'm going to give myself away to the woman, give her everything about me that was ever any good. Except whatever murderous courage might still be in me.

The world will get whatever's left of me. The darkness, the destruction, the cruelty and the cowardice. It'll get what it deserves. The world declared war on me when I was eleven years old. My forces have been deteriorating ever since. This malformed society has whittled me down to a single atom and taken one last swipe at it. That atom is about to explode. I'm going to make this corner of America my very own North Africa.

I hope when David is a very old man and finally passes, they open him and are shocked to see a little sprinkling of moon dust inside of him. I hope that his radio flesh will still be alive there on the moon, young and unburdened by his rubble flesh here. I hope Lainey's there waiting for him and they live long, happy lives far away from this place.

I go outside to the car and leave the front door of the apartment wide open. I'm going to find my next body.
The Story Behind

Rubble People

I’d like to take a moment before we get into this to mention my blog, The One-Thousand. I started it in my mid-thirties as a way to get me writing more and to focus that writing. I was inspired by Julie Powell, the Julie of Julie and Julia, who decided to cook all 524 recipes in Julia Child’s Mastering the Art of French Cooking, Vol. I in 365 days (I would have waited for a leap year, myself, and then cooked seven recipes). I liked the idea of committing to a big, long-term project.

I decided that by the time I was fifty years old, I would write one-thousand short stories that I would submit to magazine editors. I was thirty-six at the time. I’d been writing stories with the goal of being published for fourteen and a half years at that point, and I had only completed 44 stories.

In contrast, as of this writing, I am forty-nine years and eight months old. I’m up to 167 stories. It’s a far cry from 1,000, but I am picking up speed. Plus, I’ve still got four months left to pull it all together.

Rubble People was number 143 of the One-Thousand.

I like to change up my methods, approach the writing of different stories in different ways to see what will happen. “Rubble People” was one of my better experiments.

I don’t know if I read Jeff Noon’s blog post, “The Ghost on the B-Side,” before beginning this story or while I was writing it, but it was definitely before I was done with the first draft. Jeff explained a computer assisted cut-up method that he used (not unlike the manual cut-up method popularized by William S. Burroughs). I fed my half draft into some freeware, along with a paragraph of something by some famous writer (I can’t remember whom), and some words I really liked the sound of. It broke everything into two-word or three-word blocks and rearranged them. I ran the result through the software a second time.

From the garbled mess that came out, I pulled out interesting sounding phrases, or things that resembled phrases. I wrote a line or two around the best, determined how I could incorporate those into the story, and threw out the rest.

The cut-up sparked some nice turns of phrase that survived to the final draft, and also some ideas and images. Radio flesh came out of it. Also, the idea that pieces of the soldiers’ accumulated bodies are somehow transferred to their real bodies which might be hundreds of miles away. And, of course, “Lainey’s been deleted,” which gave me the ending and overall tone of the story.
I grew up with a dad who fought in the Pacific in World War II. He was unlike a lot of vets in that he talked about his experiences. We also watched the World War II documentary series *World at War* (possibly the grimmest television series ever made) back in the seventies, when I wasn’t yet ten years old. Given those albeit second-hand experiences, I can’t say enough bad things about war. It is the antithesis of everything that is good in the world. That may sound obvious, but too many people in this world don’t understand that, and so they cheer as their children march off to die, and praise their gods of peace all the while.

Having said that, I believe active military folk and veterans need all the help they can get. First and foremost, they need help staying out of war, but beyond that they deserve decent lives for themselves and their families. They agree to put their lives at risk for their countries, and too often their countries later treat them like problems to be forgotten.

In *Rubble People*, I wanted to talk about the poverty endured by the families of the folks who serve at the lowest levels of the military. These are spouses and children of active members of the military who have to go on government food programs like SNAP and WIC just to get by. I think that’s fucking criminal. I’ve never been poor, but I’ve been so broke I couldn’t afford to make a call on a pay phone. I’ve been in spots very much like the spots that Beth experiences. Mine just didn’t last as long.

Brendan Hickey bought the story for the first issue of *Aliterate* magazine. I got the check within eight days of signing the contract, the fastest I’ve ever been paid for a story. *Aliterate* won a lot of Matt-love that week.

Speaking of love, I love it when an editor squeezes a little something extra out of me for the story. Originally, for the transfer of emotion from Beth to David in the first scene I pretty much just said that she did it, she created an icon representing her compassion and stuck it onto his accumulated body. One of the folks at *Aliterate*, I think it was Emilio Jasso, asked me to better explain how that happened. I hate further explaining how things happen in my stories. I think it takes away from the mystery and the weirdness that I like to cultivate. I previously would have engaged in disagreement with whatever editor might have suggested such a thing, but this time I decided on a different approach. I would explain the process better, but I would add extra weirdness to counteract the dilution it would bring about. This is why I came up with the psyche to psyche bit, and the thread icons Beth yanks out of her head.

Work with me, and I’ll do all sorts of tricks.
Don paid a specialist big bucks for personality carbonation, but instead of being bubbly, his clients found him gassy.
The Wardrobe

A tipsy Marie Antoinette leaned into Albert’s back until she was uprighted by an Abraham Lincoln on rollerblades. At the king of all housewarming parties, Albert stood in front of the wardrobe, dressed as another king in a late-era Elvis jumpsuit. He held the end of a string in his hand. It was unknotted and unfrayed, no evidence it had ever been attached to a person.

Someone had gone into the wardrobe and hadn’t come out.

Albert had seen movement just beyond the coats as he’d pulled the string—taut only seconds ago—from the darkness. The stirring of suit shoulders and sleeves as a body pushed through, about to emerge. Then the end slipped from the garments to spring at him like a water snake. Nothing remained but creaking hangers swinging old clothing.

This was a bad idea. Jesus, this was such a bad idea. Albert stepped back to keep from falling over. A corn chip crunched beneath his shoe.

He’d watched everyone who went in to explore, everyone who came out with a costume, keeping mental track while he explained to others what a deal he’d gotten on the place and yes, what an amazing thing he’d received with it. No, he hadn’t read the book, but he’d seen the movie. No, no trees or fauns.

As he’d spoken, his right hand had rubbed across the room’s chipped cherry wainscoting, feeling the pits again and again. In the past week, his waking life had half-melted into soft, plastic dream. He’d dreaded this nightmare finale even as he’d walked toward it, worried about his liability, wondered why he hadn’t locked this room away from the party rather than making it the main attraction.

It was that guy, the boyfriend of one of Sarah’s friends. The Guy with the John Lennon Glasses, Albert had christened him, in lieu of the name he’d instantly forgotten. That Guy had been on the end of the string. This quarter ton piece of ebony, thick leaves carved into its hard flesh, had gobbled up a human being. And it belonged to him.

“Oh my God!” a woman said from behind him. He turned. She wore a green leotard, her terrified face at the center of a fuzzy pillow of yellow stamens, themselves within a halo of white flower petals. The room quieted, except for the shouts and stomping downstairs.

The other guests in the room followed the flower-woman’s wide eyes to the string in Albert’s hand. He’d given his instructions so many times before the booze went down their throats that it had become a joke. “No string, no costume!” they’d repeated throughout the evening, in increasingly Stalinist voices. Now the only words were mumbled.
“Oh, shit.”

Albert dove into the wardrobe, hanging onto the outermost hanger rod. He waved his arm into the sea of fabrics, first talking, then shouting. “Hello? Hello!”

The hem of a long blue evening gown caught the lip of a three-quarter empty beer bottle and knocked it down: a dull, glass-ringing bounce. Nothing but clothes. He stepped out and tied the string to his four-inch wide white belt. Yards more of the string piled upon the floor, far more than he remembered attaching to the doorknob at the room’s exit.

“What’s going on?” asked a Buddy Holly who had just stumbled in from downstairs. Albert ignored him.

“Sarah,” Albert said. “Take a head count, check downstairs, find out who’s missing.” He wanted to keep his fiancée busy out here. In her 1930s nurse’s uniform, Sarah resembled his grandmother in a photo from an album, far away in a rented storage space. His heart thumped like it had when he was a kid at the house of horrors, afraid to step into the enormous entrance mouth. Afraid to be swallowed.

“Hell, no!” Sarah said. “I’m not letting you go in there by yourself!” She grabbed a spool of twine from the side of the wardrobe.

Albert wanted to tell her, “No.” It was his job to protect her, but his throat didn’t even tense to form the word. He felt nothing but relief.

“Janice,” he said to his cousin, who wore several purple boas like an octopus.

“I’ve got it,” she said. “I’ll find out who’s here and who’s not. Be careful in there.”

“We might have to call the police,” came a man’s voice from the back of the room. It was the Guy with the John Lennon Glasses. In his street clothes. Shit. Albert had been certain the Guy was the missing guest. Now he didn’t even know who he might be looking for.

“Albie?” Sarah said. She pushed one of the flashlights they’d been using into his hand to rouse him. She turned her own light on.

“Yeah,” he said. “Janice, call me.” He held up his cell phone. The party had grown somber. Sharp giggles bubbled from a few, still innocent, downstairs.

“Give us half an hour,” Albert said. “If we can’t find him or we don’t come out, call the cops. But don’t tell them about this thing until they get here. I don’t suppose they’ll believe you, but they’ll figure it out for themselves. All right, you ready?” he asked Sarah. She nodded. The wardrobe awaited them, its double doors spread like open arms.

“Good luck!” The flower-woman said.
He’d felt like a hero as he looked upon the small crowd in the room. They’d looked back like he knew what the hell he was doing. Now inside, Albert’s breathing came heavier and louder as he glanced back over his turned-up collar. The lamplight from the room only peeked between hatboxes and above jackets.

He and Sarah pierced the darkness in a realm of clotted dresses and cloaks from men and women long dead. The strength he had drawn from their friends evaporated. Sarah was as big as he was, but he wasn’t big. He gripped her hand, so fragile, like his own. The paw of a small, defenseless mammal in a world of predators.

They pushed past the eighth layer of clothing. This was as deep as he’d dared go his first night in the house, once he’d realized what he had here. The “wow” of it had gone south in moments. He’d hauled ass out of there and locked the door to the room with the type of long, black, cast iron key he hadn’t known existed outside of old movies. He didn’t set foot on the third floor for two days after that.

The world in here smelled of mothballs. Sarah’s torchlight arced from left to right. Even in its light, Albert could no longer see the sides of the wardrobe. He turned his own flashlight upward, startled when the glow found the surface some thirty feet overhead.

“Hello?” Sarah called, startling him, again. Already the sounds of the muted party were lost behind them. “Sorry,” she said.

“No, no, you’re right,” he said, and called out himself, half-expecting his guests to call back. They moved between dashikis and skirts, from 1980s red leather to first-century gladiator, survivor of an empire now dust.

The wardrobe had been the one piece of furniture in the old house, sitting in the back of the third floor’s solitary room, as if it had been saved for the final leg of a move and then forgotten. The realtor, a heavy woman whose lipstick hurt Albert’s eyes, had joked that it meant the place came furnished.

And now he belonged to it.

Something tiny darted away from the light. As Albert breathed deeply to calm himself, he could only wonder what ancient particles he might be inhaling. Bits of spider eggs or insect wings. He mentally extended the wardrobe’s space out into his world. They’d be what, maybe fifty yards in now? Twenty feet above the road outside the house. His hard soles clunked on the floor beneath them. Wooden. Hollow. There was no solid ground beneath these boards. To fall through from here might kill them, would definitely break bones. But in unfamiliar dimensions, another floor might lie below. Or an unending abyss. He shook his head. This place worked on you.
They emerged into a clearing among the racks of clothing. Here, the floorboards warped down into standing water, wide as a small pond. The multi-tiered racks beyond the water extended upwards out of sight. It felt like a strange forest. Hansel and Gretel. The story had terrified him as a child. Alone in the woods, waiting to be cooked and eaten.

Albert heard a feral noise up ahead, the grunt of a large animal.

“Hello?” Sarah said. He shook her arm to quiet her. He turned off his flashlight and whispered for her to do the same. To their surprise, they could still see. A sort of moonlight filled the clearing, from what source, he couldn’t tell.

There was movement to their right, not ten feet away. Albert grabbed Sarah. She was ice and he was sweat.

It was a man—a naked, patchwork man, nipples and navels appearing where they shouldn’t be. A man clad in the skins of other people, streaked dark with blood and held together with a clumsy twine stitching. A woman’s breast hung from his shoulder.

Albert felt the cold from his feet pour upward to fill his chest, his head, his hands. It was The Guy with the John Lennon Glasses, whom Albert had at first been certain was on the end of that piece of string, whom they’d left behind only minutes ago.

The Guy looked in their direction. He no longer wore the glasses, and thank God, because he didn’t seem to be able to see them. Something about the skins filled Albert with a personal kind of terror, as if the Guy had killed Albert’s unborn children. The Guy was sniffing. If Albert had ever breathed before, he couldn’t remember when.

After long moments, the Guy seemed satisfied and waded into the standing water as if looking for something, going out toward the forest, sinking to his chest. Sarah took advantage of the noise of the water to slowly step backward, pulling Albert into the cover of the clothing behind them.

“Jesus, we gotta get outta here,” he whispered. He felt her nod against his cheek, her quick breath on his face. He pulled his string into his hands. It was slack. Fresh sweat prickled up on his neck and forehead. They headed back into the darkness, away from the clearing. He didn’t have the balls to turn his flashlight back on, not yet.

Sarah held his arm as if she was hanging over a pit. He quaked with her shivering. His free hand shook on its own as it slid along the length of string for direction before taking a step. His shoes were too goddamned loud. He couldn’t hear the water anymore. Did that mean it was out of earshot, or was the Guy without the John Lennon Glasses back on the floor, and possibly behind them?

Clothing dragged over their bodies, sleeves everywhere, empty arms touching them as they passed. Albert was hyper-aware of every touch, paying attention to any that felt alive. Every motion brought more sweat, rolling down his chest and thighs. It was so hot
in here. He itched. He ached in muscles tensed for too long. A sharp need to piss pressed on him.

He checked his phone. Its screen showed, “No Service.”

Sarah screamed, and he jumped. He clenched a fist around the phone and thrust it past her at whatever was there. He punched air and dry cleaner’s plastic and tweed-covered hangers as he shouted, “What? What is it?” He didn’t connect with anything solid.

“I felt him!” she said. “I felt him touch me! Oh, God!”

“Are you all right?” he asked, trying to put himself between her and whatever it was. His legs shook now. His fist jabbed, his arm swung molasses-heavy through the clothing all around him. Even as he fought, he knew it would be over soon. His body was reaching its limits. Dying in a ridiculous, white, rhinestone-covered jumpsuit somehow added to the horror.

In a sickening flash Albert knew what exactly about the Guy had hit him so deeply in his gut. That suit of human skin, that breast, it was Sarah’s. He’d seen it a thousand times. Never like that.

He reached around to grab her arm with his free hand, to hold on to her more tightly than he had ever held before, now that he understood what she was truly worth, what any human being was worth to someone who loved them. He felt the hairs on her arms brush against his too slow fingertips. And she was gone.

“Sarah!” he screamed. “Sarah!” His bladder emptied as if he was the one who had been taken. His arms flailed, unable to accept that she wasn’t there any longer, as if she had never been there at all. He plowed through racks of clothing, reaching for her, calling for her until he found himself running past shelves of shoes, rows which became denser no matter what direction he chose, even backwards. There was no way to find her in the ever-changing landscape. Sarah was gone. She hadn’t even made a sound.

Albert collapsed to the floor, ran his fingers through his slick hair. Tears burned his eyes. He understood how close he and billions of others were to insanity. It took so very little to nudge a person over the threshold. Raise a person in a reality for twenty-five, thirty years. Wear him down through fatigue, through stress. Then reveal to him that every prejudice he held about his universe was radically mistaken.

He had to get up. That fucker was hurting her. Killing her! He grabbed a shelf, hauled his tired and shaking body upward. His piss-soaked outfit had already grown cold. Albert removed his boots, peeled off the soiled jumpsuit. He wiped himself with the dry end of it and grabbed the only dry clothes at hand in this land of shoes: a tunic and a grass skirt sitting on a shoe rack.

It didn’t surprise him that the string was gone. It had gone wherever his phone had gone. His flashlight. Sarah.
He heard a noise. An animal noise, not like anything Sarah could have made. He was scared shitless of the Guy without the John Lennon Glasses, the animal that the Guy had become over how long a stay in this place? But he’d take the bastard down to save Sarah. More noise—clompity, clompity—a horse, coming toward him. He spun around.

It wasn’t a horse.

Not exactly. It was a horse-shaped conglomeration of clothing, one glistening black leather leg, another calico, its entire body a laundry bin of confusion strewn over the horizontal torso of dressmaker’s dummy. Fringe mane, button eyes, open zipper mouth. A clotheshorse. It had no rider and stopped when it reached him. Albert stretched out a hand and petted its great head. It licked at his hand with a wet, pink, vinyl purse of a tongue from between its thimble teeth.

“You’ll let me ride you, girl?” He glanced beneath it and saw a child’s umbrella, closed, hanging beneath its belly. “You’ll let me ride you, boy? We need to find Sarah.”

He stepped up on a shelf and mounted the horse. It began moving as soon as he found his seat. He felt no warmth from its large body. The horse’s hooves were steep, wooden-soled pumps, clacking across the floorboards. It seemed to know where it was going, and he didn’t know what else to do but trust it.

They came out of the shoes and passed through a set of enormous, round department store clothing racks, which rose like towers draped with dark blouses designed for giants. Past these, they entered a great valley. Hills of clothing rose hundreds of yards away on either side of them. A glowing river lit the scene, casting a photonegative appearance upon everything.

High above, Albert made out pinpoints of bare light bulbs hanging from an impossibly distant ceiling. They mimicked stars and together formed weird and frightening constellations, sky-filling mythologies that might squash him on a whim. Goosebumps bubbled up on his arms in the camphor wind. He peered up and backward, jerked upright when he felt himself falling.

Upon a far hilltop, flapping figures of animate clothing stalked the night. Pants, shirts, hats, bound together, filled, he knew, with no human form, yet still clinging to human memory. With motivations that might be very human or very inhuman, each equally disturbing.

“It was my job to keep her safe,” Albert whispered to the horse. His whispers amplified to fill the valley. “I should have never let her come.”

He patted the animal’s shoulder and watched the hills slowly shift around them as the horse made its way deeper into the land of the wardrobe. The air began to grow hazy.
Albert thought that every piece of clothing that had ever been worn must be here. Every soldier’s uniform and every tuxedo and ski mask. Every aspect of humankind it had ever wanted to project.

The haze condensed into a fog that felt like spider webs across his face. He batted at them. Not spider webs, he realized, pulling some from his mouth, but threads. Millions of multicolored threads, wrapping about him like swaddling blankets. He was caught in them, stuck in place as the horse passed beneath his legs.

Albert braced himself for impact with the floor beneath, but the void left by his mount had been filled. He couldn’t close his legs and found himself in utter darkness, trapped in a vast piece of clothing like a louse woven into a winter coat. And yet, still, he was cold. He panicked, tried to swing his arm, tried with whatever he had left to move before he died . . .

. . . and put his fist through the wall of his childhood bedroom.

“It’s not your fault she’s gone,” Sarah said, putting a hand on his bare shoulder.

“It is my fault!” he shouted, pulling his throbbing, bloody hand back. “I could have tried fucking harder!”

His face was wet. They were naked in his old room at his parents’ house. It was night, the only illumination from a streetlight showing through the blinds. He felt the grit of the unswept floor beneath his bare feet.

“You can’t stop cancer, Albie!”

“You can!” he said around his sobs. “I rented the comedies, but she didn’t want to watch them! All she wanted was the goddamned love stories that made her cry. I should have made her eat the right food, I should have wheeled her outside more. I should have forced the comedies on her!”

“Your mother was not Norman fucking Cousins, okay? Optimists die just like pessimists! People die, and you’re not God.”

“She was counting on me. The whole fucking thing has been on me since Dad died.”

“Look at me,” Sarah said, taking his face in her hands. “Nobody put it on you. You put it on yourself, and it’s time to take it off yourself.”

“I don’t know how.”

She wrapped herself around him.

“Put it on me for a while then.”

Sarah.
Mom.

Albert should have had no more water left inside of him, but he cried in his tomb of thread. The capillary action of the fibers drew it out of him until they swelled around him like sinewy mud. He waited there to die.

A song came into his head, unbidden. If he could have so much as twitched, he would have laughed a pitiful laugh: “I’ve Got the World on a String.”

***

He waited many years.

***

He came out of it slowly, like coming out of a drug-heavy sleep. Threads pulled sharp and biting across his skin as they parted. He felt tired, old muscles complaining as gravity pulled them into positions they hadn’t known for a lifetime.

Threads that had filled his sinuses and lungs for as long as he could remember pulled out and he heaved air again. Threads beneath his eyelids and within his urethra drew painfully from their hiding places.

His aching flesh convulsed on the hard wood floor. And still the cold was there. He realized he was completely naked, the threads of his forgotten clothing evacuated with the rest. Albert got to his feet slowly, amazed to be able to do so. He made out the form of a coat and reached for it before pulling back as if he’d been bitten.

The coat frightened him. It was a frock coat, bright blue with gold trim. It had seven sleeves. Two on the right and five on the left. There was no collar, no place for a head, only a slit in the neck. He knew, just as someone had worn every other piece of clothing here, that something had worn this.

Sanity was just the denial of a wider realm of existence.

He shook his head in sorrow for the Guy with the John Lennon Glasses even as he understood the Guy without the John Lennon Glasses. Albert still wanted to kill him for what he’d done to Sarah, but he didn’t fear him anymore.

He caught a whiff of smoke on the air. Over the racks, he saw a distinct glow in this land of indistinct ones. He went to it, drawn like an insect to light, to warmth, to safety,
knowing even as he went that it might burn him. He wondered how much he cared anymore. The crackle of the flames called to him. He parted a series of thick velvet robes like a stage curtain. There.

He found her by a library of hatboxes, naked to the waist and singing to herself. Sarah. She was older. Heavier. The shine in her hair had faded. Still, so beautiful. Around her neck was a raw choker of red where the wet, glistening skin at its borders had been twisted until it tore. She wore bracelets to match. He slowly sank to the floor beside her, shivering. She removed the jacket of her own flesh and threw it over his shoulders. He was warm for the first time since he’d lost her. Warmer than he had ever felt before. He sank his head gently into the bloody, sticky meat of her chest, not wanting to hurt her. She cradled his head in her arm.

“Are you all right?” Sarah asked. “I was worried about you.”

He shook a little laugh. “You were worried about me.”

“Yes. I was. I’m glad you’re here.”

They stayed like that for a long while. Until the fire died down.

“Come on now,” she said. She stood, lifting him with her. He didn’t know why. There was nowhere to go.

Sarah pushed aside a stack of hatboxes with her foot. A light from beyond stung Albert’s eyes. They stepped out of the wardrobe and into the third floor of his house. The room was empty. A layer of dust coated the floor and windowsills. A sealed bottle of beer sat forgotten in one corner. Sarah went to it as Albert squinted at the snow-covered ground outside the windows. What season had it been before?

He heard Sarah gulp the beer. Heard a little belch as she pushed the bottle into his hand. She was dripping on the floor. He set the bottle on the sill, removed her skin from his back and helped her back into it. They held each other and watched the frosted branches and power lines in the distance. It was so bright out.

It was morning.
The Story Behind

The Wardrobe

This was story 136 of the One-Thousand.

What was I thinking when I wrote this story? Obviously, it was inspired by C.S. Lewis’ wardrobe. My initial thought was of a wardrobe, that was spatially limitless, but instead of leading to Narnia, it just had a lot of clothes in it. It had everything that everyone on Earth had ever worn. But why stop there? It had everything that everyone anywhere had ever worn. Once my head went there, I was free to go to Crazytown. I like it in Crazytown.

Dream logic determined the details of the story. You know dream logic. When you’re in a dream, it’s how you know a thing is true without having to see it for yourself. It’s why time doesn’t follow your pissy little waking rules, and why your surroundings constantly change, even when you’re standing still.

The outfit of human skin was lifted from Buffalo Bill of The Silence of the Lambs, which shouldn’t come as any surprise to anyone familiar with that book or film.

Clothing is often used as a metaphor for identity, but it has another function, which is its first function: protection. Once I had that thought, the human story began to fall into place. No matter how much we love someone, no matter how much we want to, we can’t protect them from everything. We can’t be with them always, to step in between them and danger. We can’t always be there to give a warning. Even if we are there, there may not be a damned thing we can do. This is a reality that can be tough to swallow.

Sometimes you have no control over the situation. It’s like that in dreams sometimes too. People you love will go through trials by themselves, and they might amaze you by somehow surviving. Or they might not.

This story was at least a couple of thousand words longer in its original form. I had a whole bit with Albert in the house by himself, realizing what he had on the third floor, and being scared shitless of it. Locking the door to that room and having the good sense to stay out of there when he was alone in the house. All of that went out the window, because it wasn’t really where the story began. A story begins where something important changes, and that change sets the dominoes in front of it to tumble and the story ends around the time of the last domino falling.

You might say the story started when Albert bought the house, but there’s a lot of boring shit after that. You might say it started when he decided to open the wardrobe up
to the guests. That’s fine if you want cocktails and chitchat. Better to start when it’s too late. The preventable has already happened and now someone’s in big trouble.

Albert’s cousin Janice didn’t wear several feather boas in the version of this story that Melanie Lamaga bought for See the Elephant magazine. She wore Confederate grays, which was, as I grew up in the seventies, a go-to costume on TV. I didn’t think twice when I dressed Janice that way as I was writing the story. Then I went to a reading in 2018 armed with this story and I wisely read the room. I scratched the costume. Mentioning it would have so distracted my audience, they might never have gotten back into the story. I’m explaining this now because I think it’s only fair, and it’s too late at this point for it to pull you out of the story.

Melanie Lamaga earns a prize among all of my editors as being the only one to have gotten every single one of her changes okayed by me. When I get edits back, there are usually a couple of dozen minor changes the editor wants to make. Usually there are commas changed, a couple of hyphens added, and a few word changes and clarifications. I don’t remember that exact number, but Melanie had something between one-hundred and twenty-five to one-hundred and seventy-five changes. I gave up before I even started. In my heart, she won the fight before I read a word, but I pushed through and read all of the words anyway.

I think she was mainly whittling the work down to the word count she was shooting for to give me a fair payment for my work. And many people, if they compared the two versions side-by-side, would say the story moves better without all my excess blather. It does, but the voice of it is altered. My original, more wordy narration contained more repetition and hesitance, supporting the thick, dream-like atmosphere I was after. Ultimately, Melanie delivered a more enjoyable read, and hers is the version (mostly) you’ve just read. And I’m fine with that. I’m not a writer who’s precious about every word. The editors I’ve worked with have often helped me hammer my stories into more refined and lovely things.

That part where I mention the song, “I’ve Got the World on a String,” was supposed to be Albert singing the first two lines in his head. The first is the same as the title. The second line refers to a rainbow upon which the singer is seated. Both lines seemed fitting, but if you want lines of a song in your story, you’ve got to get permission from the folks who own that song. “I’ve Got the World on a String,” by Ted Koehler and Harold Arlen, is now owned by four different music companies.

I wrote letters to each of them requesting permission and asking how much it might cost. The first two asked how much the other guys were asking. The fourth never got back to me. The third gave me a price that was more than I was getting paid for the story. You know what doesn’t cost anything? Putting the title of a song in a story. That’s why you’ve seen it in this book three times now.

“I’ve Got the World on a String.”

There. I did it again.
Hail the Cranberry God! Drink of his blood. 100% blood, not from concentrate. Best worshiped before 02/06/32. Refrigerate after summoning.
Two and a half hours left. Roy could still trust the clock on his onboard if nothing else about it. He knocked twice on the door and called out, “It’s Roy!” The hallway stunk like mildew and nicotine. His boy, Tee, squeezed his hand when they heard Sweetie’s kids screaming on the other side of the door. Tee hated being dropped here, but right now, Roy didn’t have any other choice. He didn’t want his seven-year-old son to even know what one of the Delmars’ people looked like, much less meet one.

Sweetie’s oldest opened up. Roy pulled Tee in with him. They were always Sweetie’s oldest, Sweetie’s youngest, Sweetie’s middle one. He never bothered to learn their names. He hoped to god he’d be out of this situation before it ever came to that. Assuming his heart was still pushing blood.

Sweetie’s apartment was small. Green carpet, stained where it wasn’t worn, a jumble of kitchen chairs you had to push out of the way to get anywhere. The place smelled like fried bread, and greasy smoke made the air hazy. Roy’s mouth watered, but if he was strong enough to stay clean, he was strong enough to stay hungry. He was paying Sweetie thirty, and she was still going to bitch about feeding Tee. If Roy even thought about asking for a bite, this was going to end in a goddamned fistfight. He thought about it, even so.

The clock on her stove read 09:34. He and Tee were scheduled to asphyxiate at midnight.

The lady herself was getting ready for company that wasn’t him. She sat a few chairs away, one knee up near her face, painting her toenails swimming pool blue, now that she’d finished painting on the matching dress. Her wet hair reflected the ceiling fluorescents. She wasn’t aware of her shouting kids.

Roy held up the vacuum-sealed red rectangle in his hand. “You good if I change here, Sweet?”

Her eyes looked his way, even if her face didn’t. “Fuck is that?”

“Work clothes.”

“You workin’.” It was a statement and a question and a declaration of disbelief all at the same time. Her eyes went back to her foot. She wore her necklace on the outside tonight. It swung as she labored, tinkling against her iron shin.
The necklace was a string of little bones, soft and fragile framework pieces of toddlers and infants who had stopped by Earth for just a moment. The tiny bones were dyed in a rainbow of pastels and shone with lacquer. The first was a fingerbone of the baby Sweetie had lost as a teenager, a bone so small the hole drilled through it should have cut it in two. Others followed. Children of this baking graveyard of a hood. Strangers from miles away. Some mailed to her with no return address. Sweetie watched over the ghosts of those who couldn’t speak for themselves even when alive. It made her sacred.

Roy felt Tee’s hand press against the cylinder in his old coat. “Pop, you said you weren’t gonna do that no more!” That turned Sweetie’s whole head toward him.

“Any more,” Roy said. He bent down. Of course, Sweetie’s kids chose now to quiet down. “It’s not like that, all right? It’s not—look at me. Do I look high to you?”

Tee’s wet eyes looked up from his shaved, egg-shaped head. His jaw had seized up in the open position. Jesus Christ, Roy thought, what the hell have I done that my boy’s too scared to talk to me?

Roy held up a finger and said quietly, “You listen to me. I ain’t huffin’ shit. You got that?” Tee nodded, but he didn’t look like he was all in. Too much damage had been done. Fixing it was beyond what words could do. “You’re not going to see this can in my hand after tonight, all right? I’m selling this, and we’re paying our air tax by midnight because I like breathing even more than I liked getting high.”

Roy used the past tense and it felt wrong, because he’d only been clean two nights and every minute he wasn’t interacting with a person, he was craving. He stuffed his hand in his pocket, wrapped his fingers around the warm can.

“This shit in here—this stuff in here, anybody huffs this, they’re never huffing anything again.” His little boy knew far too much of the world for his age. Felicia must have been looking down at Roy and cursing him out. He deserved all of it and more. Roy fought the urge to see if Sweetie was looking their way. Her look had to be boring straight into his skull. He spun toward the bathroom and avoided her eyes.

The can in his hand was polished bone, smooth like glass, except for the chip on the bottom edge where his idiot cousin had dropped it. Their future was in that can. Not a long-term future. He’d gotten used to not thinking long-term, but this can would determine whether they’d be alive in three hours. Not just the can. His old skills as a master fence too. But he had more faith in the can.

He stopped at the bathroom door. Every crevice of the bathroom was emphasized in brown/black grunge. Sweetie saw him hesitate. “Watchoo looking at, you fucking junkie? Least I got a place!” Roy’s heart kicked up hard, whether from shame or fear. He dove in and slammed the door to escape her wrath. Beyond the pressboard door, twice as thick as cardboard, she was carrying on. “Go change in the middle of the fucking street, you don’t like it!”
The water from the faucet ran cleanish. Only tinted. There was no fucking way he was stepping into that shower. He stripped down fast and washed himself in the sink. The McDonald’s near the club would have been cleaner and would have been smarter, but he wanted to show Tee. Even if every other thing went wrong tonight, if Tee could see him in the suit, maybe he’d remember what it was like to have respect for his father.

Roy grabbed the red rectangle. Not even the Delmars’ lackey had wanted to deliver it this far into the avenues. He’d left it at the library. Second floor, far from the windows, on a shelf you couldn’t reach without a stool. The vacuum-packed costume was slid into the fraying blue cloth cover of Czveny’s “Puritan Law in Seventeenth Century Southern New England.” A title like that wasn’t flying off the shelf anytime soon.

The package clawed at Roy’s curiosity. Its pull was the tiniest of counterbalances to his hunger for the next high. He’d convinced himself this job tonight was big enough to distract him from wanting to run in A-Bone’s direction for another can of royal. To get him out of this shithole, to remind him that he once was a king and would be again as long as he breathed its truth. When his mouth froze, and his windpipe crystalized as the prop made its way down to his lungs. And then he’d feel his body expand. And remember that he had control over all things, that the universe was his dominion and he couldn’t ever remember what his dreams had been because everything had come true. Then Roy would be royal again.

Tonight, in the toilet, Roy was still a serf. The world saw him as a lie. He hadn’t been born to the streets. He grew up in the suburbs and went to the streets for fun, always seeing himself above it all. Now he was of the streets, not even he could deny it. Shit, he was the streets. And the city ran over him again and again, all day and all night.

He opened the rectangle. The gifts it held expanded, wrinkle free. The suit was sharp. A red deep enough he had to shake himself back to the present. They had . . . they had even given him underwear. He was never under any illusion that his life had been shit the last couple years but . . . this, this brought it home for him. He saw himself as a man-shaped bucket of shame, for what he’d let his life and Tee’s life come to. Twice every day, Roy had to fight not to apologize to his son for all of this.

He washed himself again.

The underwear snuggled his junk better than his own two hands. The suit went on big but then hugged him everywhere at once and, when doing so, took on a metallic sheen. Shit. The suit was more money than he’d seen in the last three months combined. He could have moved it and easily covered the tax, but then he’d miss out on the much bigger payoff tonight and he’d have pissed off a couple of guys that really enjoy killing people. But if they forgot about the suit and didn’t need it back, he could still move it tomorrow. Would they even want it back after it had been wrapped around his filthy ass?

Funny, it took him a minute before he even considered keeping it for himself. Owning it.
He hadn’t thought about shoes, but they were in there and even they somehow found their original form. He checked his reflection in their toes. The white shirt hurt his eyes and made the can of bone look yellow in comparison. The can slipped into an interior pocket of the jacket. No bulge could be seen from the outside. Goddamned magic.

He stuffed his old clothes into the bag, was more aware than ever how dirty they were. The bag hissed and crushed them to the size of a dinner plate. The toilet was the old type with the water tank behind it. He stuck the bag in the tank for later.

His hair was fucked, but that might work in his favor, styles being what they were these days. He stepped out of the bathroom. Every eye in the place turned his way.

“Goddamn,” Sweetie said. The kids let out a long, drawn out “Whoa!” and ran to him to touch the suit. Roy lifted his arms, suddenly aware of their greasy fingers and the smoke in the air. Putting the suit on early was a bad idea. The look on Tee’s face wasn’t the one he expected.

“I was gonna ask if I could go with you,” Tee said quietly. The boy gave himself a quick once over. “But I guess I can’t now.”

Roy bent his neck up to the ceiling, blinked quickly, and let out a breath before looking at his son again. “One day soon, I’m going to get you a suit like this and we’ll go out. Sooner than you think. Okay?”

Tee nodded. Roy had seen that type of nod from too many people the past couple of years. Roy cleared his throat and tore himself free of the kids. Sweetie had been taking him in.

“This is how I used to be,” he lied. He’d been something before, but not this suit kind of something. “And I’m going to be again.”

He stepped out of her apartment and collected himself, inspected himself for stains. He was clean. Goddamn, Sweetie had said. Goddamn right. Roy’s back was straighter than it had been in a long time. This felt right. It wasn’t the godlike feeling of royal, but there was something real about it royal couldn’t capture. This was how it was supposed to be, how he’d forgotten life was.

He hit the landing just outside Sweetie’s building. Every set of eyes on the block turned his way. This was a bad idea. He felt the sweat spring from his pores. His instinct was to run. No. You walk. You walk like you own the place. And put that fear down. Fear carries.

He tried pulling up a bus schedule, but his onboard, fucked from two years of inhaled chemicals, suddenly placed him in an ocean of spaghetti in a dark green sauce, below and above him. Roy panicked for a second, first about ruining the suit, next about drowning. It took him a heartbeat to remember what was really happening. He thought of the back arrow icon on the onboard and found himself standing on the landing.
outside the building once more, on wobbly legs. Those people staring at him? They still stared, but their faces had gone from wide open to tight, sour smirks. Same old Roy.

But worse than that, his clock was gone.

Shit.

He knew the thing was bad. Why did he check it? He was supposed to be smarter when he wasn’t huffing, not dumber. Standing here wasn’t smart either. Get moving. Be cool. Keep moving.

Little G shouted at him from the next stoop. “Yo, boss, what the hell you got up into?”

Roy didn’t look at him. “Ain’t got time right now, G. Gotta go meet with some mean motherfuckers, and they don’t like it when I’m late.” He wasn’t making eye contact with anybody. Got to walk like you have a purpose. A dangerous purpose. Roy tried to recreate a swagger from long ago when his confidence didn’t come in a can. Don’t even think about touching your pocket! These little skills came back to him.

“I gotcha! You watch yourself, boss. Awright.” Little G shouted it like he wanted everyone to know he knew Roy. But a neighborhood like this, everybody knew everybody. Not like where Roy came from. People here grew a history together.

Roy and Tee had burnt up too many hours today on a bus back and forth to Grand Rapids. His cousin Serra had been pissing herself back there, so afraid the church lab she worked for was going to catch her with the can, she took Roy’s word that the money would come later. Even though he was working on getting clean, Roy figured Serra was a fool to trust someone with his recent history. But maybe it didn’t matter to her. The moment she’d smuggled it out, she’d lost her nerve.

Serra called it anti-informational, some kind of physical code made from spiritual math. Said it removed the works of man, not from reality, but from the collective human consciousness. She didn’t seem high. More like schizophrenic. Roy was afraid he’d wasted his bus fare, but he could feel something sloshing around in the can. Church lab stuff had to be worth something to somebody. Before heading back home, he called Diedrich, who had genuinely believed Roy had died six months ago. When Roy mentioned the church lab and used the term “anti-informational,” his old connection’s tone became a lot less condescending. The Delmars’ guy had placed the suit at the library before Roy had even gotten back in town.

Thank Christ for that. It was the best (only) lead Roy had. He was gambling everything he had on this and it was way too close for his liking. Probably two hours left. He . . . what the fuck?

Hmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm
A police bot hovered high above, its red and blue lights winking lazily beyond the dying streetlight. Roy looked away. It wouldn’t waste resources on a block like this unless . . . His failed bus schedule search could have gotten its attention. A jacked-up onboard suggested drugs. This damned suit wasn’t exactly undercover, either.

No, no, no. C’mon now. It’s probably not me. It doesn’t have to be me.

Shit. He had to make this work. If he didn’t pay his oxygen tax those little valves in their windpipes would swivel shut. Roy had a vision of Tee’s finger bone hanging on Sweetie’s big old dangling necklace. NO!

Get under a roof and hope to Christ that drone finds somebody more interesting to watch. His onboard was dead to him. He refused to consider again. He’d have to go through a broker to pay the tax without an onboard and that would cost more. But he’d have enough. Whatever had to be done is what he would do.

Roy walked fast, eyes straight ahead, dodging mangy-looking mother fuckers left and right, like a satiated shark moving through lesser fish. Roy was not going to allow trouble before this deal. Do what you want afterward, life, but let nothing touch me now.

Roy jumped on the next bus going his way to a new round of hoots. Putting the suit on early had been a really, really bad idea.

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The building had seen better days, but wasn’t run down. The smell of the diner on the ground floor plucked his viscera like double bass strings. Roy hoped there’d be some free food upstairs. The line for upstairs ran round to the back and then up, compressing and stretching with the slow pulse that crowds had. His suit didn’t dazzle so much in this group, but a guy with sunglasses and short cornrows picked him out.

“Scuse me, brother,” the guy said. “You wanted upstairs.” He pointed with enough authority that Roy started moving. The guy escorted. “Give the man some room. Give him some room.”

There was an elevator on the second floor. Another suit with his back to the doors waved him on with a dozen others that were on some list, or looked like they were.

Couple of these women were already drunk, already laughing and loud. All of them had someone else to talk to here. Who goes to a club alone? Roy. That’s who. He felt exposed here even though he blended in. Fuck. His breath. He’d forgotten about his breath. Roy ran his tongue over grungy teeth. Mouth tasted like dogshit. Maybe it was a good thing no one wanted to talk to him. He’d keep his mouth shut as long as he could.
He was hungry for food. He was hungrier for royal. His onboard was offboard. His brain was overboard. *You’re not a fucking junkie. You’re not a fucking junkie. You’ve done this a million times. You’re cool! You got this!*

The elevator doors opened. A breeze struck Roy and brought with it the scents of half a dozen types of smoke, hard liquor, and perfumes. They were on the roof. He froze for a second wondering if this was right. He moved when the others began to push past him.

There was a garden up here, flowers and shit. Wrought iron trellises matted with vines that must have been fast grown, because scenes like this didn’t sit in the same place two nights in a row. The music was just loud enough to keep folks from hearing each other’s conversations and there was a little glut of people around a polished bar.

The cotton candy cloud generated by the data foggers sagged low enough that Roy was tempted to brush his fingers across its belly. The beauty of a collapsed government was freelance cops who had to buy their own equipment. They didn’t like risking it by piercing information blindspots.

Roy spotted the royal like it was a beacon. On a little bench by the north side. Three people hovered over it. The couple had come to party, huffing for kicks more than need. But the lady, she was doing business. And taking a little off the top. But she was put together, she was on top of it. You could master royal if you had . . . whatever she had.

_Keep moving, but not too fast._ He downed the first two drinks that came his way, not caring what they were, but tasting that they were amped. His look came with its own credit, so he ordered an appetizer. He picked the parsley off a plate at an abandoned table and stuffed it in his mouth, chewing it fine and swishing it around his mouth to tame that murderous breath.

Breath.

When you’re the lowest of the low and you need the services a government used to provide, like water you can drink, you go to GuvDotCorp. And in exchange, they grow things inside you for that clean water. And you pick up garbage for two meals a week and a “snack” which is a six ounce can of juice, and you give filtered blood twice a week to earn a fifty-dollar medical coverage coupon each month. And you do piecework, and you get people you know to sign on for the same shit. But what if you miss too many appointments? What if you put shit in your blood that costs too much to filter, or you don’t get enough sign-ups? You find out when they send you a bill for all that oxygen you’ve been using. That’s when you learn one of the things they grew inside you was a valve in your windpipe, and you’re worth more to them as a sack of organs or a hundred and twenty-five pounds of animal feed than anything you could give them while you’re alive.

What time was it? It wasn’t getting any earlier. He roamed the perimeter three times. Where the fuck was the Delmars’ guy? Roy caught himself shaking. He tried to calm himself with slow, deep breaths, then broke into a coughing fit because he was no
longer capable of slow, deep breaths. Instinct told him to seek out a cooling can of royal after the coughing had subsided. He’d avoided that one table with his body, but not his eyes.

*My boy is going to die if I don’t do something about it.* He told himself that over and over. That mantra was the only thing that kept him on track. He would have been huffing again late yesterday afternoon if he hadn’t had that guiding light in front of him. He would have let his mind drift away on the open sea this morning. Would have sold the church lab shit early to any old junkie to kill themselves on it just so he could pocket the money and die himself when the Delmars found out. If it hadn’t been for the boy.

*Don’t panic. You didn’t used to panic before. You used to be on top of things. You used to be doing this to buy a nice car, not save your son’s life.* Using started to make sense to him under the current circumstances. One hit would take the edge off, especially after two days dry. He wouldn’t be so distracted, he’d regain some control, make the right decisions, negotiate like a baller.

Everything dissolved. The drink dissolved self-respect, the world and time dissolved Roy’s hope. Roy found himself talking to that woman he’d been avoiding without remembering what led him to this point. He parceled out his part of the conversation between tight lips, knowing his teeth had to be decorated in parsley.

Her name was Naysa. She wore a dress carved from a single piece of old dark wood, polished until it looked like glass filled with black coffee. Its curves shone like dark cherry, but if he stared too long at its center, Roy would get lost in the abyss. Naysa’s eyes were present and on him, but the way her neck twitched, he knew she hadn’t mastered royal after all. She only stood on the opposite bank of a two-year addiction from him. She was the before to Roy’s after.

Almost as much as the royal, he wanted to ask her the time. *How long till I die? How long till my boy dies? Please answer in years.* But if he asked, she’d know he wasn’t shit, because what kind of scrub doesn’t have an onboard? Why did that even matter to him? He hadn’t seriously considered being with a woman in a long damned time. Felicia once told him he made her skin feel like champagne. But now he was broke, homeless, dirty, and was toting around a kid. He no longer had the confidence to charm that can off of her. But Naysa’s eyes fought to avoid the depths of his jacket, like his fended off her dress. There you go.

“You like the jacket?” he asked.

“I like the jacket.”

He slipped the can of bone out of his jacket pocket and dropped it into a pants pocket. The pants adjusted to accommodate. Her eyes followed the movement. “How ‘bout the jacket for a taste of that royal?” he asked.

“For what?” She pulled back. She thought he was asking for sex.
“The prop,” he said, nodding toward the can in her hand. She was not from his side of town. It was prop because royal was nothing but propellant.

“Oh! For the jacket? The whole can?” She took a quick hit herself before handing the can over. “How about most of a can?” She was ballsy, but then, she had no other choice. She seemed to have already forgotten the bone can. He took the steel can from her like it was the hand of an old friend.

“Ssssssssssweet,” said the can. Yes. Roy felt the first bit of icy relief his throat had had in days. Two days clean, it hit him almost immediately. Naysa was wide-eyed. Probably at the size of his hit.

Finally, Roy felt in control of himself. It was time for a contingency plan. Fuck the Delmars. Their people didn’t show, that’s on them. Three quarters of the way back to Sweetie’s was the best opportunity to move the rest of the suit. It was the kind of neighborhood where a couple guys he knew had the money and the interest, but it was also the kind of neighborhood where they wouldn’t call the drones on a guy running down the street in his underwear. First things first. He needed to get his onboard up and running again so he could check the time.

Such a bright and violent flash of light filled his field of vision that he was certain he’d been struck in the face. Jesus, that was a mistake. How the hell did he think he’d make his onboard work? By sheer force of personality? He shook reality back into his skull.

Naysa stepped away. “I gotta go.” The jacket really worked with the dress, he had to admit. She was still attempting some sort of manners even though she seemed scared of him. But when her line of sight shifted to over his shoulder, she dropped even that attempt. Her eyes bugged, and she spun away without a word of goodbye. Roy turned. Ho-lee shit.

The Delmar brothers had come in person. Whatever they were doing was big. And he was part of it.

“Good to see you, man! Been a while.” White Delmar came forward and they shook hands. Roy had moved some weapons their way back in the day and the three spent a few seconds of catch-up. The two Delmars were in perfect sync with one another. As soon as one started talking, the other would scan the crowd, until they switched back. They were almost one person.

“You got something for us?” So much for small talk.

“I sure do,” Roy said. He reached into his pants pocket slowly, aware that the Delmars were killers by trade. White Delmar’s neck stiffened which seemed to cause black Delmar to instantly turn in Roy’s direction. He’d somehow made them feel he was doing something dangerous by trying not to do something dangerous. He froze.
“It’s cool,” Roy said. But his words were drowned out by a mmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm . . . The three of them and everyone else who wasn’t already in motion turned their heads to the East. Three police drones. Two hung back, one moved in. Fear hit Roy like a train. This was his fault. When he’d tried to check his onboard, it tipped the cops that one low-class junkie was up here making a scene and the folks with the money would be only too happy to let them dip through the cloud cover just this once to escort his ass over the side of the building.

White Delmar had his weapon out and fired so fast (BU-DU-BUP!) Roy didn’t see it happen. But that white Delmar was able to do it at all meant the drones were toying with them. Probably recording the whole thing for the fans watching the police feeds as entertainment. Better drama meant more tips for the guy running the drone.

Three bullets entered the bot. The bot’s metal body stretched out behind it in three places before elastically snapping back into place. There were no entry holes. Bot technology had stepped up.

Before he got off a second triplet, white Delmar let out a moan that caught a snag in Roy’s soul. Roy fell to his knees experiencing Felicia’s death a second time. He’d heard it was hell being dragged in the wake of a police heartbreaker; Imagining a direct hit nearly made Roy want to give up on life then and there. The weapon shut down the heart’s mind by draining out every bit of love ever held inside it.

White Delmar’s expression opened wide, as if a knife had been driven into him. Something blew out of his mouth with his last heaving breath like the fragile flakes of long dead leaves. Roy’s cringing face was covered in the wet ash that had just been inside white Delmar. It spattered his teeth and stung his eyes.

White Delmar’s corpse hit the rooftop with a muddy, struggling “DAMN.” This was the Delmar’s world. Governance by blood rather than law. Blood between brothers and blood that they spilled. Now Roy was wrapped up in this world. His involvement would end violently and soon.

The bot turned to Roy. Its tank body wore bits of Delmar. Roy’s high disappeared like he hadn’t huffed in a month. He was beyond conscious planning. Without willing it to do so, his hand lifted the can in his hand and sprayed.

Above the driving music and the shouts of the people getting the hell away from this scene, the bot screamed. Metal bubbled and popped. Plastic dripped. Fluid pulsed out into the empty sky and dry lubricant sizzled. The drone dissolved unevenly in a gooey mass of technological gore. Roy found himself forgetting what exactly this hovering mess had even been before.

Here he was on the front lines of a new age of warfare. Humans against human-mastered machines, fighting with weapons that worked at the level of the soul. Code that had mass, grown from spiritual math. Anti-informational, love-sucking, church lab death.
The three bullets suddenly exploded from the bot’s body as if they’d only been on pause. Roy flattened himself in case anything else in its history was pressing up against its inner walls, waiting to make its escape.

Wet code dripped from the bone can’s nozzle onto his hand. He panicked and wiped it on his pants. His hand burned. No. It didn’t. What he’d felt was the icy cold feeling of evaporation. His hand was fine. His pants, where he wiped it, were not. The fibers were already burning away from the point of contact, like an army of hungry insects had gone to work on it.

“FUCK!”

Black Delmar was gone. The second and third drones were gone. A lot of people were gone. Some were taking cover behind the bar or under tables. Naysa had somehow torn down a piece of the cloud cover and wrapped herself in it. There was a riot at the elevator doors. “That elevator only goes up,” Roy heard himself saying. If those people were lucky, it would take them off this rooftop, above this city, and into the black night forever.

His heart, his blood, his consciousness, were all racing too fast for him to cry. He searched white Delmar’s pockets. No wallet, no money clip. It was late now. He didn’t know what he was going to do, but he had to get back to Tee, even if he couldn’t save himself. Even if the only way to save his boy was to somehow force his too big hand down the kid’s too small throat.

The door to the stairs was locked. The stuff in the can took care of that. The works of man fell before it. Shit. He took a breath, tried to sense the quiver of a little valve in his throat. Maybe the stuff in the can didn’t eat human flesh. That didn’t mean it wasn’t toxic as hell. There was a good chance he’d just come up with a plan to murder his son and kill himself. How much did that matter if that nightmare company was going to kill them within the hour, anyway?

Something had gone wrong back there. He couldn’t remember what, but he did know something that had been inside of white Delmar was now on his face and it was Roy’s fault somehow. He’d had a feeling he’d been followed to the party, but he hadn’t actually been. There’d been two police drones in the distance and . . . things went nuts-up.

Down the stairs. He was racing into something bad. Why hadn’t anyone gone down the stairs ahead of him? Had Naysa given him royal or something else? He’d never had memory problems or this paranoiac dread before tonight. And his high had walked out on him quick. The next time could be worse. Anything could be hiding inside of a can.

Down. Down, into the scattering stragglers on the lower floors. News was spreading faster than gravity could drag him down to the street. Roy had spent his whole professional life setting up safeguards, designing contingency plans that ensured he would never be backed into this type of corner. Royal had royally fucked him. No. no.
no. no. Roy had royally fucked himself. That was where the truth was. Fucked himself and the only person in this world he truly loved.

Sharp lights rolling down the streets and hanging overhead blurred past him. Roy was oddly sharper than he’d been in a long damned time. He dodged bodies like doing a slalom run. He felt the grit beneath the soles of his shoes. The air on his increasingly exposed legs. Closer to death than he’d ever been, he was finally alive. His legs pumped hard. He didn’t know where his breath was coming from, like his body was forgetting to cough. With any footfall he knew his throat might close up. Meaning with any footfall Tee’s throat might close up. Roy ran through his city. Tears ran down his face.

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He kicked Sweetie’s door in. He was bare-legged, sweating, out of breath, gore-spattered, screaming for Tee, with a spray can in his hand. He looked at the clock on the stove. 11:57.

Sweetie’s kids screamed and scattered. Tee had fallen asleep on a pair of chairs, and now looked up at his father, shocked and confused. Roy stumbled over the toys on the floor and through the chairs. He felt time slowing like it did in the worst dreams he’d ever had. Like it did when Felicia was killed.

“What the fuck?” Sweetie came out of her bedroom in her underwear. A man emerged behind her, half dressed and pushed past her to the busted front door.

“I don’t need any of this,” he said as bolted past the busted front door.

Roy grabbed his son by the arm, handling him like a doll. “Open your mouth or you’re gonna die!” Tee wasn’t thinking defensively. His mouth was open, and he was crying. Roy’s eyes were wide, his spray can raised.

Sweetie slammed into him. They both went down, but Roy’s ribs caught the back of a chair on the way down. The two adults were in a tangle, neither on top. Sweetie screeched, “Don’t you fuckin’ touch him, you motherfuckin’ maniac!” Her fists flew everywhere, connecting with her target’s soft flesh, tearing open against the edge of a chair.

Roy hit back, crazed with fear. The digital clock over the stove shone too bright in his mind. “I gotta save him! He’s gonna die!” Roy sobbed.

A bare foot connected hard with his head. Sweetie’s oldest joined in to protect his mother. Roy was dazed, but there would be time for being dazed later if he survived. He struck out with maddened fury. A fist upward and into the kid. Then in front of him and into Sweetie’s face. He dove up, took half a deep breath that was cut short when he felt
some mechanism right above his collarbone whir and then catch. The shock of not being able to draw a breath nearly derailed him. He sprayed the can into his mouth.

“Harshhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh . . .”

Roy’s mouth caught fire. Cooled only slightly by the vomit that came through almost immediately. That appetizer, those two drinks. He wheezed and choked. His body was wracked by coughing, his brain felt like it was going to explode. He was coughing up blood and white ooze. His teeth hurt as raw nerves were exposed to air for the first time in years. His fillings were being eaten away.

Tee struggled to climb up a chair, shaking, terrified, aching for breath that wouldn’t come. His arms swung out, as though he could reach for the air his burning lungs starved for. He fought to escape, fought for air, fought for something, anything.

Roy tried to stabilize his cough-quaking hands on his son’s face. He stuck the nozzle of the bone can into his boy’s mouth and sprayed.

“ssss” And then the can was empty.

“Please, God, no!”

He spit into Tee’s mouth to wash what little of the code had made it out down the boy’s tongue, to add to it whatever anti-informational residue Roy’s own mouth had left. Roy looked into his boy’s terrified eyes and pleaded directly with God, because where else had God ever been but in his child’s face?

“Let him live! Let my baby live!” His boy was heaven and his boy was earth. Tee was his religion, the reason Roy still climbed to his feet every morning and fought another round and if his boy died—if he had killed his own boy—he would kill himself next. If he didn’t die from heartbreak, he would kill himself.

Tee convulsed, then vomited. Roy sat him up, so he wouldn’t choke on it. Roy had enough control over himself now to look at the stove. He had to wipe the water from his eyes. It was 12:02 pm. Air was getting into his son’s lungs. That was all that mattered.

Roy rose. He had a taste in his mouth like fresh-from-the-box plastic he’d never be rid of. The lab can was empty. He remembered spraying it all night but he didn’t remember why. It was the most evil goddamned thing his filthy hands had ever touched. He jammed it into the overflowing garbage can beneath Sweetie’s sink.

“Get the fuck out of my house,” Sweetie said weakly. She sat on the floor against the wall, cradling her oldest in her arms. Her face, her chest, and her child shone with the blood from her nose.

“I will in a minute. I’m sorry, Sweet. My boy was gonna die if I didn’t do something.” Roy spoke around coughs. His side felt like it was tearing open with every spasm. He didn’t really know why Tee had been about to die, but he’d felt so convinced
of it, he accepted that his earlier self, one with maybe a clearer mind, knew what it was doing. He almost said, *I'll make it up to you.* He almost held up the can of royal and said, *I'm done with this shit.* The can was somehow still with him. Of course, it was. He wouldn’t have ever let it get away.

He got a stray sealing bag from her counter and put a few ice cubes in it. He grabbed his old clothes and what was left of the toilet paper roll in the bathroom and went to Sweetie. He didn’t know if you were supposed to put ice on a busted nose, but he was trying make peace. He set the bag and the TP on the floor next to her when she didn’t take them, and braced himself for her punch. He was willing to take whatever abuse she wanted to give him. She left him alone.

He hugged his coughing son. He almost said, *I'm sorry. I'm sorry for all of this.* “You awright, little man? I had to do that. You understand?” Tee nodded.

There was shit to do. He could sell the shoes. Keep the shirt and the underwear, at least for now. How the hell had he gotten into that party without any pants on? He and Tee had to roll out of town tonight. He couldn’t remember why. His fucking drug-addled head. At the kitchen sink, he ran the water and sprayed the rest of the royal straight down the drain.

SSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSS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The Story Behind

Out of Breath in a Sharp Red Suit

Out of Breath was number 166 of The One-Thousand.

I came across one of those “master plots” posts online. Some say there are only three basic plots in all of literature, some say more. This one said twenty, and it categorized them by emotions and drives, like jealousy and revenge and the sort. As I happened to be fishing around for something to write, I decided to take ten of these and see if I could come up with some basic ideas for stories. This story was the first one to come out of that. You’ll read the second, “Stars so Sharp They Break the Skin,” a few stories from now.

I can’t for the life of me figure out which master plot inspired this one, and I have studied the list a couple of times since, trying to do so. It had nothing to do with addiction because that idea wasn’t there at the germ.

The oxygen tax and the valves were there from the get-go, and well into the last stages of the creation of this story, I thought that ridiculous premise was going to sink it, no matter how good I could make everything else. It wasn’t until I dismantled the government, in whole or in part, and created GuvDotCorp that I assuaged my fears.

I had the transformative power of the suit in mind very early, though my first thought was for a blue suit. I like blue. Although I had a spectacular blue in my head, no matter how I conveyed it, you’d still see a blue suit in the title, and how common is that? Then I remembered Maurice Broaddus.

Maurice is a great science fiction and fantasy writer and I encourage you to check out his work. I’m sorry to say his involvement here has nothing to do with his writing. I first saw him at the World Science Fiction Convention in 2013. I didn’t go up and talk to him because, although I knew of him, I hadn’t yet read any of his work, and I feel like a dope pushing myself on writers if I don’t know their work. But . . .

Maurice wore a red suit at that con that made you say “wow.” A red suit not only distinguishes you from all the schlubs knocking around in T-shirts and shorts, it also makes you stand out amongst all the other suits. It was impossible not to notice this guy as he made his way around the hotel lobby and convention center floor. It made enough of an impression in my mind, that it was still firmly in there years later while I was searching for a stunning fashion statement.

Roy is in no way based on Maurice, let me make that clear. But Roy’s suit, though shinier and more technologically amazing, is totally inspired by Maurice’s suit.
As I’ve gotten older, I’ve gotten far less concerned about the science in my science fiction. In my mind, I call what I write weird science fiction. I like the futuristic and technological aspects of science fiction, but I’m tired of the standard stuff I’ve seen too many times. There are going to be breakthroughs in the future that won’t seem reasonable at all to us. Things will be discovered that no one alive today could have possibly predicted. That means the future is going to get weird at some point and continue to stray from anything we understand as sane.

You’ve seen this weird stuff in “Rubble People,” and you will see it in “Stars so Sharp They Break the Skin,” and now you’ve just seen it here. Spiritual math, physical code. Heartbreakers. I love making this shit up. Two weeks before this book was finished, I changed the name of this story to “Anti-Informational Love-Sucking Church Lab Death.” It was only after some discussion with my Patreon friends and library co-workers that I decided to change it back. And, to be honest, “Anti-Informational” had a few more votes.

The basic plot pieces were in place from the beginning, but as work went on, I felt the story was missing an inner problem. The weird part was that Roy’s addiction had been in place, but I wasn’t really using it. It was almost like a character’s hair-color in that it was there, but had no bearing on the story. I turned his hunger way up and tied the crucial fuck-up of the story to Roy’s drug use. Whether Naysa sold him royal or something different, he ached for it, paid for it, and huffed it because he was after royal. His attempt to get some control over himself before the story ends isn’t entirely because of the effects of the royal, but because of the effects of the code, and he doesn’t even know it. Well, whatever gets you there.

Some people need a likeable protagonist to enjoy a story. I’m not one of those people. Sympathetic is different than likeable, and I think Roy is sympathetic (though I don’t need a character to be sympathetic either). I think characters should feel like real people and work through tough events in their lives. If you hated Roy, I get that, but I hope you didn’t hate the story because you hated Roy. He hits a woman and a child at the end of this story. I think, even though he does it to save the life of his son, some readers will get bent out of shape because he didn’t get any comeuppance for those acts. Sometimes comeuppance doesn’t come. Love it or hate it, I thank you for reading it.
They were replaceable men with replaceable parts, but Radio Shack was clean out of love.

— “The Song of the Modular Men”
A plate, a plate, another plate burst upon the kitchen tile. This one broke into three large pieces and assorted ceramic crumbs. Giraffe closed her long-lashed eyes and prayed to her many makers. Why in the world would the people make one hard thing that was so likely to smash into a second hard thing?

“Another one?” Ms. Mtombe yelled. “Get out of my kitchen immediately!” She seemed to have been lurking near the kitchen entrance in anticipation. Giraffe didn’t bother to look. That unshining face made guest appearances in her night terrors. It was Tuesday, so it would be the zebra print dress, the long strand of Moroccan beads, and those slapping gold sandals.

Giraffe turned off the water, wiped her hands on the dish towel, and let out a long sighber. Giraffe’s designers—possibly a focus group of three- to five-year-olds—had blessed her with a ridiculous set of stubby arms which protruded from just above her forelegs. She had to almost climb into the sink to wash the dishes. And with the proximity of the wall behind the sink and Ms. Mtombe’s impossibly low ceilings—which Ms. Mtombe insisted were high ceilings—Giraffe’s head was pressed snugly into the upper northwest corner of the room. She had to rely on her silicone-skinned hands to feel their way through.

“I wanted something graceful, like a gazelle, something that would look beautiful in my home, and look at what I got,” Ms. Mtombe said. “I would prefer a wildebeest to you.”

“My sincerest apologies, Ma’am,” Giraffe said. “If you will excuse me, I must step outside, Ma’am.”

“You are always stepping outside and inside again. What is so important outside? You’re letting in flies!”

“My neck hurts, Ma’am. From bending, Ma’am.” Her polished hooves clopped across the floor.

“They can make a giraffe that can walk and talk—”

“I could walk long before the enhancements, Ma’am.”

“—but they can’t make a giraffe whose neck won’t hurt indoors!”
“I should like it if they made one of those as well, Ma’am. I encourage you to take that up with the agency, Ma’am.”

No wonder the dish washing machine had quit in a huff!

Giraffe squeezed past the sliding glass doors and unfolded herself into the blinding back yard. Her head bobbed to the top of her height as if it was one of the floats in Ms. Mtombe’s pool, escaping from beneath its wriggling child. She stretched and bent her neck back as far as it would go. Vertebrae popped like bubble wrap. Oh, that felt good!

Giraffe fantasized of roof-removing storms and arms that reached to the stars, scrubbing out stubborn sunspots with the lemon-scented dishwashing liquid of the gods. She shook one stunted tyrannosaur fist at the sky. Or perhaps at her neck. She swore revenge. On . . . something.

The Kawawas’ lion sunned itself in the next yard. Intellectually, she knew the lion should not harm her. Nevertheless, she kept a metaphorical eye on it when it they were outside together. If she didn’t fret so much over scratches, she could have kept a literal eye on it as well, given their removable nature. Giraffe looked back into the kitchen.

Ms. Mtombe watched her while shouting into her headset, presumably at Mr. Mtombe:” This is not a servant, this is some sort of insult! This clumsy beast is destroying our home! We can’t afford to buy a new set of dishware every week . . . I want a replacement. Now! . . . I don’t care if there are no others available, demand an exchange with someone. You have people below you . . . Well, someone must have one!”

Giraffe heard all of this through her cybernetic ear while wondering why anyone thought that a cybernetic ear would be important for a giraffe housekeeper. Most of her enhancements were questionable, to be honest. Disco ball eyes. Regenerating caramel tail. Cybergills. Giraffe was afraid she had come along at the end of a cyborg servant frenzy, when an exhausted industry had grasped in desperation for any animal that was left, and hastily hot-glued on whatever miscellaneous enhancements had been found in the dusty corner of the factory floor.

Ms. Mtombe didn’t understand that she and Giraffe were two of a kind. Two years into her husband’s promotion, she was at the very bottom of the nouveau upper-middle-class, too house-proud of a place in Kimara which they couldn’t quite afford. She’d been catapulted from a life which was the envy of all around her, to a world in which she was woefully behind. The trophy possessions she managed to gather were never quite right, inspiring derisive smiles from women who wouldn’t deign to call her a peer. Giraffe stewed as one of those second-rate status symbols.

While Ms. Mtombe was turned away for a moment, Giraffe saw a chance for a quick snack. She trotted toward the acacia tree.

“You will stand your ground, Giraffe,” the acacia tree cyborg warned, “or suffer the consequences!” It bent its limbs in a one-legged karate stance, ready to chop. Giraffe
was unperturbed. The tree would never dream of damaging its mistress’ property, whereas, in Giraffe’s case, that train had sailed.

A little more snacking effort was required now, as Giraffe had already stripped the leaves off the limbs that always fought to push her away. The lazy acacia and its slow-growing leaves made it necessary for Giraffe to go deeper. But Giraffe always won. Trees simply didn’t have the killer instinct of the ferocious herbivore. Giraffe chewed greedily, undaunted by the acacia’s screams. They were screams of indignation rather than pain, anyway. Probably.

Giraffe tried to alleviate the tree’s outrage with her soothing words. “You taste infinitely better than Ms. Mtombe’s giraffe chow.” But the snobby tree didn’t seem able to take a compliment.

“Enough!” it cried. It stopped trying to push Giraffe away and instead embraced her. Giraffe had only wanted acceptance from the acacia. Its affection was totally unexpected, though perhaps, Giraffe thought, not unwanted. But, alas, Giraffe had been mistaken. The tree limbs’ cybernetically enhanced thorns pressed into Giraffe from either side. Like that, the acacia had become an enormous mouth and Giraffe had become a ham sandwich.

“What is going on here?” Ms. Mtombe appeared and began spritzing Giraffe’s dancing legs with that dreadful anti-ungulate spray. It smelled like Satan’s ravioli. “How many times have I told you to leave my tree alone?” Ms. Mtombe shouted.

“I would like nothing better at the moment, Ma’am. It seems that I am being eaten by your tree. I suspect this is an act of revenge rather than of sustenance and I strongly encourage you to take this up with the agency, Ma’am.”

The thorns tore into Giraffe’s flesh as her arms punched air that was almost near the acacia’s trunk. With the end in sight, Giraffe’s thoughts were butter-side up. As deaths went, this was certain to be no more humiliating than the rest of her life.

Fortunately, at that moment, the lion attacked.

Intellectually, Giraffe had known that it shouldn’t attack, given the restrictions imposed upon it by its pie slice of cybernetic brain. Intellectually, Giraffe had known that she would never be eaten by a tree. Upon reflection, Giraffe recalled the intellect under consideration was that of a giraffe, which perhaps had its shortcomings in modern day suburban Tanzania. In her defense, the lion didn’t seem to be attacking her, but Ms. Mtombe. Giraffe suspected it was her delicious looking dress.

Ms. Mtombe screamed. Her short, chubby legs tried something that resembled running, but the lion was nearly upon her. Giraffe kicked her sharp hoof out hard, squarely into the center of its head. Momentum carried the lion’s body—if not its head—into Ms. Mtombe, who frothed in terror, but the lion only twitched as it died.
To acacia trees, giraffes have always been far more terrifying than lions. After witnessing Giraffe’s nonchalant disposal of her foe, the tree lost its nerve and released her. Besides, not having been supplied with a cybernetic esophagus, it would never have been able to swallow even a bite-sized Giraffe.

While Ms. Mtombe dealt with the police, Giraffe waited inside, tending those wounds she could reach with a tub of Old Chizimu’s Giraffe Spackle (Original Flavor). Even after viewing the tree’s memory of the events, the police had trouble believing there was a giraffe in the house. One officer poked her head inside the kitchen.

“Hello,” Giraffe said. The officer withdrew her head.

When the police questioned the lion’s cybernetic enhancements, their manufacturer offered, through them, to settle with the Mtombes on the spot for thirty million shilingi. Ms. Mtombe demanded a replacement for her servant in addition to the money. Giraffe would have lowered her head in mortification had it not already been bowed due to being indoors. She hoped her replacement would be a lion. To be delivered next Tuesday.

“Yes, of course,” the lion’s left hind leg responded. “What type of servant would you prefer in exchange?”

All was quiet for a moment, save for the sound of the acacia tree rubbing its limbs together in anticipation.

Fortunately, at that moment, Ms. Kawawa attacked.

“You beasts! The lot of you!” Ms. Kawawa shouted as she marched across her yard in a sensibly solid dress. “My wild date palm told me everything!” Giraffe peered out of the back door. Shit, it seemed, was about to go down.

“The lion tried to kill me,” Ms. Mtombe said in a supplicating voice. She had always feared Ms. Kawawa.

“My baby would never do such a thing!” Ms. Kawawa said.

“We’re sorry to say that he did, indeed, do such a thing, Ms. Kawawa,” her baby’s leg said.

Ms. Kawawa was undaunted: “You filthy trash have been a blight to this street ever since you moved here!”

Giraffe had always imagined that the look of horror now on Ms. Mtombe’s face would be delectable when it came. In fact, Giraffe’s cybernetic stomach felt as if it had dropped into a pit of cybernetic acid. Giraffe felt herself drawn out of the house. She had to put herself between the two ladies and comfort her mistress.
“You and that freak of an animal,” Ms. Kawawa said, pointing at the approaching Giraffe, “your fool of a husband and your nasty children!”

At those last words, Ms. Mtombe’s lips grew tight. Giraffe stumbled and then spun about, galloping for the safety of the kitchen.

In the end, Ms. Kawawa was grateful for the presence of the police. She too ran for the safety of her kitchen.

At some point, the police officers thought it was safe to release Ms. Mtombe’s tight arms. Giraffe cowered with her head on the kitchen floor. Ms. Mtombe looked at Giraffe, who sought some way to cower even further. Perhaps she could dig through the tile with her mirror-facet eyes.

“How about,” Ms. Mtombe said to the lion’s leg in deep, shaking breaths, “instead of a replacement, a longer set of arms for my current servant?”

Giraffe raised her burrowing head slightly. A couple of tiny eye-mirrors tinkled to the floor.

“Absolutely,” said the leg, with some relief. It already had to replace the rest of its lion.

“And also,” Ms. Mtombe said, “Extra support for its neck.”

After the police had left and the lion’s leg dragged its corpse out of the yard, Ms. Mtombe came back inside and looked at Giraffe while holding her fists to her hips. Giraffe said nothing. She had cleaned up the kitchen (except for the dishes), and now folded the laundry in perfect right angles.

“Well,” Ms. Mtombe said after a sigh, “you do do an excellent job cleaning my ceiling.”

“Thank you, Ma’am.” Giraffe nodded most effectively, thanks to her cybernetically enhanced nodder. “The popcorn texture feels delightful on my back, Ma’am.”
The Story Behind
Giraffe Cyborg Cleans House!

Back in 2013, I was straightening some magazines at the Barnes & Noble I worked at, when I thought to myself, “I don’t want anything to do with science fiction or comic books anymore. Writing or reading.”

It was a sudden decision, but it was coming at the end of years of frustration. Not just the frustration of trying to sell stories, but the frustration of not having anyone in my immediate, physical world that I could geek out with. There is honestly no one in my life I can have a face to face talk with about how great Karin Tidbeck’s *Amatka* is. Or Abbey Mei Otis’ “Blood, Blood.” Without that, ever, life can feel cold and dead sometimes. Most of the people in my world don’t even give a little bit of a damn. And, at the time, I was spending time with a woman I was quite fond of, and science fiction and comics could not have been less important to her.

I wasn’t leaving with a tear in my eye. I myself didn’t care anymore. I even tried to muster some excitement at a used bookstore at one point (there is always something awesome at a used bookstore). Nada. Worst of all, this happened just before I was supposed to go to the World Science Fiction Convention. I still went, because I wanted to see my friends and have an experience, but I told everyone I was quitting writing and I was just going to focus on my podcast. It made for some awkward introductions as my friends introduced me to people while trying to shift the focus of who I was.

I have this thing I say in relation to this, because it does come up: If it’s not in you to do something, you only have to quit it once. If you love something, you’ll quit it a thousand times. Needless to say, I was back to my old ways a few weeks later. But I ran into a problem.

Neil Clarke put out the call for submissions for an anthology about cyborgs. I had an idea for a funny cyborg story, and although I’ve never read a funny story that Neil had edited, I figured that would just make mine stand out more. You want to mix things up in an antho, right?

I think I had part of it written already, and it would make a perfect project for me to get back into writing science fiction. Not only had I already begun, but there was a deadline that would compel me to finish it in a timely manner. But when I sat down to actually makes words on the screen, I was stuck. Not stuck, more like frozen. Like, frickin’ paralyzed. There was still some residual apathy hanging over me from the Quit. Part of me knew no one would buy the story, so why even bother?
There’s a not-so-brilliant movie called Congo based on a Michael Crichton novel. At one point, our team of heroes has to jump out of a plane. Tim Curry is frozen at the edge, where inside of airplane meets outside of airplane. He knows he has to step into the sky, but can’t, for the life of him, move. Sensible, if you ask me. He asks someone to push him, and that someone does. And then we can get on with our movie.

I e-mailed a couple of writer friends, Christie Yant and Grant Stone, and asked them to push me out of the airplane. Each of them placed a boot on my back and gave a much-needed shove. It was the slap in the face and the “Get a hold of yourself, man!” that I required. I was on my way and haven’t quit since (that’s probably a lie)!

(It just occurred to me if Grant had married Christie, he could have been Grant Yant. They and their spouses probably wouldn’t have gone along with such a thing merely for my entertainment, though. And they call themselves friends! No, wait. I called themselves friends. Never mind.)

The brilliant comic book mini-series, WE3, written by Grant Morrison and beautifully illustrated by Frank Quitely, put the idea of animal cyborgs into my head. A giraffe seemed a sufficiently ridiculous creature to use in my own story. Stuffing the poor thing inside a human house and expecting it to clean up a bit struck me as both funny and rife with problems for the protagonist. Once the tree spoke, I knew I’d hit gold.

Giraffe is number 144 of The One-Thousand. Neil rejected it, but David Steffen, who is much more on my wavelength, bought it for Diabolical Plots. Then he showed it to the folks at The Drabblecast and they wanted to run it on their show, so I got paid a second time for doing no additional work. David, will you be my agent?

David is also responsible for the title. My original lame title was, “Giraffe Cyborg Helps Around the House.” David’s double meaning is far better.

The Drabblecast’s audio version was produced by Adam Pracht. If you’re a fan of StarShipSofa, you’d love Adam’s Drabblecast stories, because he imported Sofa talent to make them. However, Adam took this story on before he knew I was the author. The story is narrated by Sofasister Amy H. Sturgis and the art is by Sofa artist Skeet Scienski. So, four StarShipSofa people did some work on that Drabblecast story. I hope Tony C. Smith at StarShipSofa wasn’t pissed at what appeared to be a mass-defection. We love you, Tony!
Our fetishistic Senator had his taste buds transplanted onto his hand and savored 10,000 supporters in a single rally.
“What are nightmares like, Five?” Tanse asked me from pale, cracked lips.

Arrays of poinciana leaves twisted on my body, fooled by the light of the fire. Behind me they curled against the hard chill of night. Minutes had passed since I had mentioned nightmares, but the boy had been famished and fighting to produce a thought. He held his head and gritted his teeth when we spoke. He was young for a human; his biological markers put him at about nine years old, though malnutrition may have stunted him. His greasy, wheat-colored hair had likely never been washed. He ignored the biting lice, but not the pain inside his head when we talked. I wanted to take the pain from him but didn’t know how.

Images flashed inside my brains:

The eastern walls of the lab sink inward like a water bearing ceiling until they burst in blue light. The men outside bring shock, soldiers of the enemy lab, Jaki. They fire and loot, their red wiry brains flailing outward to soak up industrial secrets before those secrets are destroyed. Everything the people of Shyler have struggled for over the last seven years crumbles in the space of ninety seconds. I witness firepower and flame, disintegration and malice. Pieces of human bodies, those of my many parents, spray through the air.

“They’re not really nightmares, Tanse,” I said. “They’re bad memories that resurface when I’m quiet. I used the word because I thought you understood it.”

I wasn’t happy with the word “memories” either. Everything in my mind ran ever present. At times a stored object insisted itself upon a little-occupied processor and became something more.

Tanse’s father was a man of wax, melted into place by the heat of a hard-spent life. Gravity pulled his features down like it held his arms to his sides. He looked too exhausted to climb to his feet, much less go back to the fields to protect the crops. But it wasn’t a killing cold tonight. Not even cold enough to keep Tanse from sweating.

Tanse’s mother scraped her hand, wart-ridden and looking older than any age she’d ever see, along the piece of bark in her lap. The bark held her food and it sat empty now. Her railing moans denied what her own eyes told her, so she felt every millimeter of her primitive dish, felt for the food she knew must be there. I shook some of my food onto her plate. Her thumb touched the puckered orange wedges and she continued eating. The woman, a pile of huddled gray rags, sank again into quiet, save for her loose, mushing mouth.
Filtering the fire from my ocular band, I looked out on the countryside and the points of dozens of other dinner fires. Farther out, the dull glow of Mount Termite's lights pinkened the blue-black sky. Termite loomed over us all, reaching out beyond the troposphere. Real people lived there, real people with sharp minds and modern technology. Nothing like these shells with which I lived. My leaves curled a little more and I sent roots down to find a relative warmth in land which held the lost heat of the day. My body and the fire provided heat enough, but I took comfort in the permanence of soil. I allowed the light of our fire back in. It washed over my field of vision until Mount Termite became one of those memories.

Tanse’s soft, dirty face turned to me, his furious lips formed words that his mind couldn’t comprehend. He drooled from the corner of a silent mouth as he worked out the problem. I cupped his face in one hand. Tanse liked the touch of my silicone fingertips on his skin. He was fleshing out, much stronger now than when I’d first arrived. Tanse was special, the only one here that tried to talk to me, and for that I felt I owed him the truth. What limited truth he could handle. Tiny rootlets sprouted from my little finger and drank in the saliva running along the side of the boy’s chin.

“It’s like thinking while you sleep,” I told him. He slumped out of my grasp, let out a sigh, not of defeat but of triumph. His face went dead again, like those of everyone else here.

I dumped the rest of the food from my bark plate onto his. This family ate better food than the other farmers here at Jaycourt. From my body, I grew them nutrient-rich vegetables — tomatoes, broccoli, carrots, and others — to supplement their subsistence diet of wheat paste and modified fennel. Tomorrow they would taste mango, perhaps for the first time in their lives. Tanse’s parents wouldn’t know the difference.

“Rest now,” I told the boy. “Eat. I’m very proud of you.”

Like every night for the last month, I placed my plate near the boy before he cleaned his own. I spent my days with these people working the land, sun shining down, taking temporary root in the soil. I didn’t need food. When Tanse finished eating he collected the bark plates and set them together by a jagged stone. That stone, this fire, these in total passed for a home for the family.

In time, the eating stopped. Then soon too in the yawning emptiness, the distant cries for more food ceased. One by one, out to the edges of the tracts, the bone-bag forms dropped to their sides and curled up like dogs with their backs to the night.
Daytime. We worked in the fields, watering the crops. I had yet to see rainfall here. Tanse and his people used hoses attached to bronze tanks that bowed their backs. I staked out my own patch. The others always gave me ample room. Their squinting eyes avoided me like they did the fiery glare of the tanks, though those shone brighter by far than the curving obsidian gleam of my ceramic skin. If they ignored me, they didn’t need to hold their heads in agony.

I’d changed my form for the job, a cross between a piece of old industrial farm equipment and a hedgerow. I was a living system, an intelligent system, with conscious control over the molecules of my intertwined natural and synthetic bodies that no other creature had ever known. I stored my sugars, created my carbon dioxide if needed. Artificial xylem and phloem ran through my organic tissue, carrying water and nutrients where I chose, faster than any natural structure. It allowed for unparalleled growth rates. My parents had incorporated their highest technologies into me. Perhaps to the exclusion of their own defense.

I watered the crops from six sprinkler heads that sprouted from the top of my body, drinking from the water table far below. I filtered out the toxins in a way these plants could not. In a way these people could not. My water misted cool and soothing to the yellow wax bean plants. The water the humans pumped could have brewed tea.

Another memory forced itself upon me: *My name is Process Five. I’m a product of the former Shyler Military Labs, a cybernetic organism joining the elemental living kingdoms of vegetable and mineral. I gained consciousness four weeks before the present moment, aware only seconds before the Jaki attack. My life is set into motion by Gon Marter, one of my fathers, a dying technician seeking immortality in my escape. Gon, his eyes filled with panic and blood, holds my head with both hands. He screams above the blasts as fire rages behind him. I’m given one command:*

“RUN!”

*I carry out my orders, taking a centipede-like shape, the best possible to scramble over the melted piles of rubble while minimizing myself as a target. I shoot forth clinging vines, grabbing rocks and duraplaz rods to pull myself up and over the ruined walls to safety. After days of running, I find this place, a haven of peace. A place where the people seem to have already passed beyond the shadow of Syn, the Lord of Death. Enemies don’t come here.*

Here amongst the farmers, one of my mouths snapped up a green-headed jitterbug, itself chewing a leaf down to the vein. The insect’s back legs kicked up before ceasing with a crunch. I chewed its leaf as well, tasting the DNA. The genetic library from which I drew my abilities included samples from tens of thousands of plant species. These feeble specimens wouldn’t have made my creators’ first cut.

To my side, Tanse dug with an ancient trowel at the roots of a dying brown plant. The Jaycourt Farm employed prehistoric methods. Dozens did the work that one person could have done with machines. Machines that could be obtained in Simulation City on
the far side of Mount Termite. I knew of these places and what could be found there without ever having visited them. My databases included no information on the Jaycourt Farm. What had happened here?

***

Night. Tanse’s mother slept on the dirt nearby while Tanse and I sat bathing in the light of the enormous blue moon that dominated the northern horizon. To the west, a much smaller moon trailed it.

“King Moon ascends to his rightful place at the top of the sky while Vassal dances orbit about him,” I told Tanse. “Your legends say King Moon was his own world until Arwonax enslaved him and bound him to orbit around the planet Unity. Arwonax is the merged god, one head representing the constructed and one representing the natural.”

“Like you,” Tanse said.

“Very good,” I said, rubbing his temples. “Like many things. Like the Jungle at the heart of Simulation City. The Jungle is electricity. It is light. It is information. And yet it grows and thrives like a natural rain forest. Once, everything that ever existed was one thing. But then that one thing shattered, and the universe passed thousands of years trying to understand itself and remember. Arwonax spends his existence piecing things back together, merging things, healing the universe. One day he will finish and rejoin the Universe and we will all be one thing once more.”

Tanse yawned and fought against something which I could not see. I’d kept him up too late.

“Turn off your mind for a moment and I’ll give you a gift,” I said. He relaxed. I lifted his small body and led him to his mother. He walked with clumsy steps, his right arm slung over his head. I laid him down and draped his arms about his mother’s sleeping form.

“Come back now,” I told him. The young boy’s eyelids flared as he came back to his senses with his mother in his arms. When his surprise passed, he closed his eyes and clutched her tighter.

“Momma,” he said.

***
The next day, I experimented. While the others checked leaves for insects and disease I stepped between a farmer and his destination. A beard covered the man’s sun-dried face and blackening teeth. Most of the farmers made a point of shunning me, but they reacted slowly. I could make them look at me if I wanted, though I didn’t like hurting their heads. I expanded myself into a monstrous form. Nearly three meters tall, I towered above him, a creature of thorns and gleaming ceramic teeth, large asymmetrical eyes and graphite claws. The farmer’s dead eyes stared right through me. How would I reach these people? I needed answers.

Had I known what form those answers would take, I might have wished for ignorance.

***

They came up on the Jaycourt Farm by foot, three men with living minds, connected by a private network. Not so private to me. The thoughts they shouted to one another hung on the air to be read. Why were they here? Were they the overseers? Two of them carried instruments, possibly weapons. Yes, the thumping of their hearts, the tang of their sweat. Weapons. Golden javelins on rotating turrets joined to their right arms. The javelins connected to frames on their heads by metallic cables, a control system more secure than their mental network.

From the distance, past hunches of gray-draped farmer backs tending their plants, they spotted me.

[Who’s that big guy?] one asked, over their private mentanet. His feed tagged him as Norken.

[That’s our disturbance,] the one called Kale sent. [I saw some crazy version of it back at the shop.] Kale had no weapon. He acted like their leader.

Norken dropped his weapon arm as the third man raised his.

“King Moon,” the third man said out loud. “It’s some kinda combot!”

He fired his weapon and Norken joined in. White needles spat out, sounding like the flutter of a thousand butterfly wings. The needles passed over Tanse’s wide-eyed head and the bent backs of his parents. My makers would have been proud of me.

I ran.
The needles shattered or ricocheted off of my hard shell or tore off bits of my organics. Pieces of my vines wriggled on the ground. The shrapnel began to liquefy, and I tasted a neurotoxin in it, a fast-acting synthetic cousin of tetanospasmin, absolutely harmless to one like me, without an organic nervous system. Still I ran. I watched the attack across three hundred and sixty degrees through my ocular band. The needles came at me, raced by me, flew ahead of me. Tanse’s father stood up in the middle of the horizontal rain. A needle pierced his temple. He made a sad, low noise and dropped to the ground, shaking like he’d grabbed a live wire.

“Wait!” Kale shouted, tugging his two men by their tunics. [You idiots are destroying company property!]

Tanse ran to the old man’s body and fell to his knees. He held his jerking father with both hands and screamed, “Noooo!” while his mother kept on working, oblivious to her mate’s death throes.

The men stopped firing and trampled through the crops. Kale barked orders in their minds:

[Hewe, grab the kid, he’s contaminated! Norken, Get that bot! It wouldn’t be running if it was armed!]

The one called Hewe swept up Tanse in his huge, leg-breaking arms. Tanse was delirious but smart enough not to kick. He cried and held his head.

“Five!” he screamed. I twitched but not enough to throw myself off-stride.

Hewe carried Tanse back toward the direction from which the men had come. From forty meters away I heard the hard pumping of his blood and bellows-breath. He ignored Tanse’s screech:

“FIIIIVE!”

The one called Norken chased me, or tried to. He lost ground by the second. Kale stood and watched me, bent down and picked something up where I’d been just seconds earlier.

“Syn!” he said, dropping it. He crushed it beneath his boot. [Hewe, bring the ship. I don’t care if it gets the deaders worked up. The bot’s getting away.]

I could never outrun an airship. But I found the massive hatch to one of the underground warehouses. It ran twenty meters long and I lifted it by a handle made for a large machine hook. I entered the warehouse and saw Norken slow down before I slammed the overhead door shut with a boom. Their words were foremost in my mind as I made my way deeper into the maze below.

[Kale!] Norken sent. [He ran underground! You want me to flush him out?]
[No! Absolutely not. He’s baiting you. And stop screaming in my head.]

[Bots don’t think like we do, Kale. This one looked scared to me.]

[Bots think better than we do, dumbass! Shut up and lock down all the doors and wait! That’s the thing MACROMOT’S been having fits about, Norken. The colors, the feel of the thing, you can tell.]

[You can tell.]

[It’s different from anything I’ve ever seen, but it looks like something out of Shyler. The way it runs, without bobbing, smooth as shit. It’s got their finger smudges all over it.] The man, Kale, seemed dangerously intelligent. Perhaps this explained why he didn’t need a weapon.

[Didn’t the Jaki trash that place a couple of weeks back?]

[Yeah. This thing must’ve gotten away. Might be broken. This could be big for us, Norken. It’s part plant, I think. That could be its power source, photosynthesis. Wouldn’t hurt to starve it of light for a few days before we go in after it.]

[Right, then,] his man sent. [I’ll kill the power.]

***

A day passed in the forgotten depths of Underground Storage Facility Number Three. An eternity to consider my past, present and darkening future. I tore open a sack and tasted the rancid grain pouring through my long fingers. The farm’s produce sat here and rotted. Why spend the effort? With a kick, I broke open the side of a crate and watched maggots spill out.

My nightmares persisted, but a new one replaced the old. I dreamt the same one every time now: Tanse’s filthy, saline-streaked face screams my name while the muscular thug tears him away from everything.

“FIIIIIVE!”

They were real people that came, lucid and powerful, not like Tanse’s people. They didn’t want only me. They wanted Tanse as well. Why? “Contaminated,” Kale had said.

Tanse was special.
I slurped up a handful of maggots through a root-lined metallic tube that extended from where a human might keep its mouth. I was also special, too valuable to lose. But for whom? A dead technician? My creators had passed from this plane. I remained, without family. And I’d abandoned the only friend I had ever known.

How valuable was I now?

My head and shoulders slumped, not of my will. My hands dropped to my sides and maggots fell to the ground. I didn’t know why. Lightning diagnostics failed to show any power blink or pseudo-musculature failure and as fast as it had happened, my systems returned to normal once more. The effect of an unknown technology of the ones above.

Yes. They’d arrived. Their machines disturbed the local probability fields. I didn’t concern myself with the animal dilemma of fight or flight. Masterless, I found no reason to fight. From here, there would be no place to which to flee.

***

I’d littered the warehouse with sensors, pieces of myself, each mere atoms wide. I felt the men enter when a draft stirred up with the opening of a small maintenance hatch at the far end of the farm. Bodies moved past.

[No visible or infrared light.] Norken sent. His words rippled over my body from three hundred meters away. [We bag this thing quick and we’re across the border to GreenStation before dawn.]

GreenStation. To the South. When they’d found us on the farm the day before, they had approached from the West. The residue of their black light generators reached me even this far away. I wanted all of this to be over.

There came a distant sound, a light rain of metal on metal. [Damn!] Hewe sent. [Stop those things, Norken!]

[Stop! Stop!] Norken sent at the same time. His was a command signal. Their machines betrayed them. Kale couldn’t have been with them. After a moment I heard a heavy breath.

[I can smell him!] Norken said. [Through my boot.]

They came my way, into the bowels of the warehouse. Eventually their black lights filled the corridor, though I bent their rays around me instinctively. They carried different weapons this time. They’d learned, but what had they expected the first time?
I waited at an intersection. Norken was close before he sensed me. He looked down, focused on his boot. I could have reached out and squeezed his face. He sensed me and jumped backwards, heart rate exploding.

Norken fumbled to activate a machine at his hip, something I didn’t recognize. He aimed, and it spewed mathematics at me. It meant to incapacitate me, but in the formulae it belched I saw hints of a solution to my problem. I would take it to pieces. I dedicated five processors to it.

“What? What?” Hewe shouted. He hoisted a long-barreled something to his shoulder, though he couldn’t see me. Neither, I imagined, could Norken, though he could smell me through the device in his boot.

“Shoot him!” Norken yelled.

“Where?”

“There!” He pointed with his machine at me not two meters ahead. Hewe didn’t waste his time with math. He let loose with the thing on his shoulder. It lobbed thick blobs of fire onto me, white like molten steel. They stood too closely to one another. The mouth of the weapon dribbled onto Norken. We both erupted into flame. Norken screamed and tore at his clothes.

My body burned, unmoving. I disregarded the pain. I could extinguish the flame, breaking down the molecular bonds of the fuel. I chose not to.

“You idiot!” Norken cried. He stripped to his waist, his shoulder red-purple and mutilated. The armor sat on the floor in flames, releasing noxious smoke.

Norken fished around with one hand in his bandolier, which had fallen to the ground. His feral eyes darted from the bandolier to me until he found a tiny package and tore at the wrapper with his teeth, plastered a patch on his neck. A nerve dampener, I assumed, as his quick, panting breaths slowed and lengthened.

Part of my mind dwelled on a resolution, tied up in computations for the problems Norken had fired at me. Those would be solved any second now. I couldn’t understand why they’d taken this long. The fire crackled. The water in my cells steamed up in whisper hisses. Though the carbon fiber of my skeleton withstood the heat, the polymers to which it was molded did not. The titanium in some of my components began to burn. Left alone, the fire might not consume me, but it would critically damage me.

And I wrestled with an existential crisis.

“It’s not moving,” Hewe said. “Maybe it shut down. Kale’s gonna rip my head off if I let the whole thing go up.” He inched closer to the me. He poked the barrel of his firespitter into the flames on my body. Hewe nudged around in the heart of the fire, scraping, jabbing, stirring the ash of my organics.
Tanse screams at me. “FIIIIIVE!”

I had given myself the task of bringing the boy out of his stupor, strengthening him
if for no other reason than to explain to me what had happened on the farm. But another
reason developed. Tanse for the sake of Tanse. I knew one peer in this whole vast
universe, appointed by myself. I had one friend. I needed to protect him, it was the
nature of friendship. He might still be alive. He could be suffering right now. I would
save my friend.

In less than a blink I enveloped Hewe. His bare skin sizzled where I touched him.
He had time for a quick intake of breath, but not time enough to scream when my large
hand twisted his head. He may have felt the crack of his neck, but it would have been the
last thing he ever felt.

“Hewe!” Norken yelled.

I dismantled what was left of the fuel. Carbon dioxide quenched the flame. I let the
corpse fall to the floor. Norken bolted backwards, stumbling back up the corridor. That
nerve dampener was the worst idea he’d had in a night full of bad ideas. He tore at it as
he fled, abandoning what weapons he’d had at my feet. He ran like a drunkard toward
an exit too far away, with a hatch that might take precious seconds to open. His fear
smelled good.

I gave chase but hung back, salvaging what I could of my skeleton, changing shape
to take advantage of what I had left and growing from the ashes. I had more than
enough time. As damaged as I was, I remained in good killing shape.

He yelped at every noise I made, every crunching step and groan of metal just
beyond the reach of his night eyes. His boot’s nose seemed useless to his broken
concentration. Norken ran the best his heavy legs could manage; his lungs heaved in the
stale, dusty air. I was ready for him now.

“You!” I boomed.

Norken shrieked. His body jolted as if he’d been shocked. He swung his arms wildly,
smashing his knuckles against a pipe.

“Where are you?” he demanded, backing against a wall.

“What have you done with the boy?” I asked. He lost control of his bowels. His
goggles fell down his sweating face.

“The boy! Tanse!” I said. “You took him from the farm. What have you done with
him?”

“We took him to MACROMOT for mental reconditioning!” Norken said, regaining
control of his voice. “I’ll get him for you! Is that what you want?”
“I have what I want.”

“Please don’t kill me,” he begged. His hands reached up in the air.

“You brought weapons. You thought you kept me in the dark. What bot do you know that can’t produce its own light?” I flashed a blinding light, scarring Norken’s soft, wet eyes. He screamed, covered his face and collapsed.

I fell upon him, heavy as a small vehicle. My fresh, dripping thorns bit into him. His screams died as paralysis set in. In moments, Norken’s breathing stopped.

Some of my processors had failed. Other processors were working on the resolution of that mathematical problem which no longer needed to be solved, but they would finish soon. I carried components damaged beyond use. I could repair these in time. I broke Norken’s body down and digested it. My organic form could attain mass rapidly with available nutrients. I ate his equipment to feed my other hungers.

I was not a robot, a thing to exist solely for my programming. I was not a human with those fears and desires which drove my creators. I was Process Five, a new creature. And I would make my own path from here.

“I’m coming, Tanse.”

***

I found their airship a hundred meters to the West, unsecured from the outside. They’d expected a quick escape. The airship’s computer field generator flashed in silence, awaiting a master who would never again call her name.

I opened a too-human mouth, exposing speakers. A high-pitched whine of synthesized sound came out. The computer’s field shimmered and revealed its secrets, spurned spouse to illicit lover. I traced the route of the airship’s last flight back to something known as the Mind Company, five kilometers to the West. We took to the air, leaving Mount Termite behind us, but never escaping its view.

The ship vomited vital statistics on the Mind Company. Nothing too revealing. Enough that I would recognize it when I saw it. In the river rush of inflo, one name occurred which made me slow my input and devote an entire processor to its implications: MACROMOT. A mind which dwarfed my own.

***
I stood far outside of the small fortress. A six-meter high wall surrounded the Mind Company compound, topped by a translucent dome. A gunship, an armed version of the model I’d flown here, patrolled the night sky and I assumed armed guards patrolled within. I left my ride on the edge of the woods two klicks back. The front door never occurred to me.

I went below. My body separated into one hundred modules and each bored into the ground. We tunneled faster than any rodent, reveling in our surroundings. The earth tasted so much richer here. The walls and foundation sank only a single story into the ground. Good. They didn’t run a big operation. They could only fit so much defense into a building that size. That they hadn’t stopped me yet attested to the quality of their defense. The Mind Company was just a business. A ruthless business that strong-armed the weak, but a business. They lacked the paranoia of a wartime military. They could have used that paranoia tonight.

We burrowed below the building, and then straight upward. We found the microscopic cracks of the compound’s fibercrete foundation. Our fast-growing sprouts pushed upward, aided by a hundred impromptu jackhammers, nanometers thick, along the upper edges of each of our bodies.

Vegetation had one drive: to live. Life drove itself up through the cold, damp soil to touch the sun. Life drove itself through fibercrete without complaint and without resentment. It bore no grudge against the stone. It didn’t question its right or its ability to live. Life knew it must live and proceeded to do so.

We felt the relaxed and unhurried footsteps of dozens of soldiers, technicians and workers above. No one knew of our presence. We felt for the absence of movement and my selves converged upon that area. An empty room. We cracked the tile above us. Tiny fissures ran its length and our many shoots sprouted up through the floor. It crumbled and we rose up from the debris. My body knitted together, grew long and low to the ground. I sprouted large purple bulbs.

The smooth and unwavering voice of the security system said, “You are not authorized to be in this section. Please wait here to be met by an escort.”

A small part of me broke off and scuttled to the nearest computer field. At my command the field sprang to life and data gushed at a speed incomprehensible to humans. A yellow squiggle, which resembled the folds of the human brain, underlay it all. Below that squiggle read large yellow letters:

_The Mind Company — We’re the idea people!_

Two masked soldiers arrived in the opening doorway. Cables extended from their weapons to their heads. Needlers like the ones used by Norken and Hewe when they took Tanse. Same make, same brassy, snaking souls. I’d come to the right place. They
opened fire. Their needles pierced the bloated purple bulbs which ran along my body and those burst dry into yellow clouds of spore more deadly than the needles.

“Unidentified object two meters southeast of my mark!” cried the one soldier, his voice trailing the wisps of recent puberty.

“Possible neurotoxic contamination!” shouted the other. He was older, more knowing, aware of the real threat to his life. His shout held a fearful hint of shattering glass. They felt me before the threat registered. The soldiers ceased firing to claw at their masks and their heads where the weapon cables entered.

The One: “Under my mask!

The Other: “It burns! It’s burning me!”

Death seeped in, on a scale smaller than their masks’ designers could have anticipated. I attacked them in every way I knew how. Somewhere here lay the answers to a little boy mentally brutalized, far from his disgraced hero, far from peace and safety. I smoldered with hatred for these men and with guilt for myself. I wasn’t fighting to give them a chance. At the junction where the needler cables met their firm melon-rind heads, my spores infiltrated — biological, pico-mechanical, digital. The enemy’s front line, two men strong, fell to the head-cracking floor in spasms. Their weapons, unbridled by soft minds, fired automatically, guided by a thousand conflicting, sharp, dying micro-thoughts. They snapped off their turrets and whipped like hoses.

My two selves rejoined, and I knew the building. I knew where Tanse would be kept, I held some idea of what lay before me and the God-mind beneath it all. I scurried over the fallen soldiers. Their brothers entered the corridor, some taking fire from their fallen comrades’ weapons. They returned fire and more spores filled the air. I overcame these men with as little effort as the last.

The silky throat of the security system refused to give into panic, even as she rushed to protect her charges:

“All non-com personnel, please evacuate to the nearest safety zone. All non-com personnel, please evacuate to the nearest safety zone.”

Two corridors and twenty corpses later, they changed tactics. I entered a lobby where two hulking robots opened fire upon me with explosive disassembler ammunition. I sprang into the air, expanding into something resembling a black leafy net. I tracked the trajectories of a billion pieces of tearing nano. My net expanded in places to let the shrapnel pass through. But not all of it passed through. Shards of me wedged into the walls and ceiling. I shed contaminated ends where the tiny machines ate me alive.

Net-me encompassed the two robots and contracted, slicing them to short-circuiting pieces with my molecule-sharp edges. I snatched up some of the bots’ damaged pieces to
replace my own. People ran bloody and screaming. They hadn’t evacuated to their safety zones.

I mended somewhat, healed a bit, not fast enough. I leapt to the ceiling and held on, bristly, barbed, and thorny, before busting through it.

The MACROMOT Reconditioning Center was one tiny room with a title on the door. Tanse lay masked on a table, his body bruised and filthy. The top of his skull and scalp sat in a little tub of blue syrup on the counter next to him. A red mask covered his face, chin to forehead. One thick tube ran out from the mask to the ceiling. The surgeon that was built into the wall performed a crude surgery on Tanse’s brain. All six slender arms worked their lasers and micro-manipulators, directed by a computer somewhere behind the plaz wall. A thread of smoke rose from the point of contact inside the little head. I had allowed this to happen.

With an info-laden wail from me, the robotic arms that had worked Tanse over re-attached the top of his skull and retracted into the wall. I pulled the boy to myself, wrapping as many arms around his frail form as I could grow, taking great care to protect that little must-be-throbbing head of his. I would heal him, somehow.

I pounded through the wall near the surgeon arms and went through. Bootsteps behind us, I hadn’t forgotten them. The robotic surgical arms attacked the guards at my urging as the men stepped within reach. I heard their screams.

I burst through wall after wall. I wanted to head downward, but the chase pushed me forward and upward. Soon we entered MACROMOT’s monitoring station, abandoned by its human controllers. The field of every computational projector in the room came alive. The black Living Light, information flow so dense that it acquired mass, reached out and swallowed us. A soft shower of white inflo in this new black world fell like snow in the night. All stimuli evaporated save for one that overloaded my sensors and demanded every erg of my processing power. MACROMOT had found me. The sheer weight of Its intellect overwhelmed me, one-thousand stories tall. I began to understand.

This being was far larger than Its physical structure could allow. It achieved a mind more colossal than the capabilities of Its brain. There ran in MACROMOT spirits of a sort. Spirits of the still living. In the thickening haze of data my small mind caught only glimpses of them. The merest feelings of people I had known. I had intuitions of Tanse’s mother, of the bearded farmer and others from Jaycourt. And yet here they were fully realized creatures. Humans. More than humans. Unleashed creative intellects which swam within MACROMOT even as they expanded the boundaries of what an electronic intelligence could be. MACROMOT incorporated the minds of what I thought to be those mindless farmers, more trapped here than any other consciousness in some ways. More free in others.

BE STILL it demanded of my will.
“Unlikely,” I said. I ran. Ran to where I knew the monitoring station must end. I should have reached it by now, I thought. I may have been through and to another room while this giant smothered my input. I may have merely thought that I ran, while the Mind Company’s incompetent boy-men vivisected me with diamond shrapnel in the heart of the station. And then yes, I felt it. Some buzzing at the back of the world and I ran in both places at once. The boy in my arms played some part in this. I ran from the soldiers. Their gunfire struck me. They had abandoned their useless needles and taken up real weapons.

“You shall open an escape route for us!” I told the grand machine at the center of all things.

EVEN LESS LIKELY. MORE LIKELY THAT YOU SHALL BE CRUSHED.

They peeled me apart, those buzzing chainsaw gnats, chipping my ceramic skin, slicing my composite frame. I left behind a puff of nano-scale crystalline chips which tore into the armor and flesh of my enemies. Tireless flagella would drive those chips throughout their bodies, pulping the screaming men as they went.

Still, they outnumbered me. I ran less efficiently than I had only seconds earlier. The ocean of MACROMOT made it difficult to defend myself. My hydroxy recombinator struggled to refill the punctured water collection reservoir in my chest and quench the thirst of my vascular system. I repaired slowly if at all. A hundred tiny wounds soon became two hundred, then three. I shouted at a local computer field. It displayed the head of Kale propped upon the end of a needler. Some humans chasing me stopped short for a moment. Every second helped.

“Your defenses have proven inadequate so far,” I told MACROMOT.

YET YOU FALTER, it said, AND HERE YOU ARE, SLOW ENOUGH THAT I CAN EAT YOUR MIND.

“No. Part of you wants me to escape with this.” I projected an icon representing Tanse’s body. In the ghostly ether, that icon seemed to accrete spirit stuff, hooking tufts of Tanse’s being, which swam toward its glow and fed it.

NO.

Tanse’s distorted voice spoke from the electronic lungs of MACROMOT:

“Yes!” the boy shouted. He was here, young Tanse. Part of his mind was with us, though his body lay unconscious. His icon came to flapping life. “You let me go, you let me go now! YOULETMEGONOW! YOULETMEGONOW! YOULETMEGONOW! YOULETMEGONOW!” he screamed again and again until his real body stirred and the sweat and the tears and the snot and the spit dripped down his furious face.

Until MACROMOT itself screamed: YOU LET ME GO NOW!
Everything became quiet. The world in which we stood disappeared as if lights had come up in a theater. Though we might not live to enjoy it, we had earned our freedom.

We stood on the rooftop landing deck. I carried Tanse into an awaiting airship. Soldiers arrived as the hatch closed.

“HOLD YOUR FIRE!” came a voice that resonated with that of the localized god, MACROMOT. “I REPEAT, CEASE FIRE!” Our airship rose into the air and a portal opened up in the dome above. Confusion reigned on the ground. The officer in charge must have realized that something had undermined him. I heard the chaos on the air.

[Who gave that order? Who gave the order to cease fire?]

[It sounded like the security computer, sir.]

[Since when are we taking orders from the security computer? Open fire!]

They fired again, the guards and the gunboat outside the dome. We watched the dome seal up after our escape, making the soldier’s fire ineffectual. The gunboat’s fire ceased, and it did not pursue. MACROMOT had regained control of its people.

“Very slick,” came Kale’s voice from the back of our craft. He held a weapon aimed at the boy in my arms. Another man to fight. Our shredded and dripping bodies hovered near death already. I hadn’t the resources to bring us both out of this alive.

“No,” Tanse moaned. He bled from several wounds and didn’t have the strength to launch himself at Kale, though he tried.

“There’s nothing to be gained any longer,” I said. “We have reached an agreement with MACROMOT.”

“Have you now?” He seemed impressed. “Well, good for you. But I wasn’t in this for MACROMOT’s sake. I want something else. We’re going to take a little trip to GreenStation. Not too far, but a world away from this. I’m not looking for a fight. Shape you’re in, I’m guessing you’re not either. I want to bring you to see some people. I think they could learn a lot from someone like you, or what’s left of you. They’d fix you up too. They’re no Shyler, but they’re not half bad in their own way. For my part, they’d pay me a pretty sum for the introduction. Everyone’s happy.”

“So why are you threatening the boy with that weapon?” I asked.

“Insurance. So you hear me out, maybe see things my way.”

“No,” I said.

“You don’t have a whole lot of options here,” he said. Even as he did, he may have realized that he had few options himself. The muscles in his forearm twitched. From the
angle of his weapon I knew he wanted only to injure Tanse, but one more injury might have meant death.

I chirped at the boat and it answered by falling into a nosedive. I covered Tanse as Kale pitched toward us. Part of me became a long spike on which Kale impaled himself.

I chirped again, but too late for the ship to pull out. We’d flown too low, the ship too sluggish. I stretched myself out, parts of me grasping whatever handholds I could to absorb the shock of the crash.

The world shook me loose as it crushed us from below. The collision hammered the ship, ripping metal and shattering plaz. It knocked me senseless for a moment. But I lived. The ship mitigated the impact. It had tried to pull out but had no time to finish the maneuver. I rebooted automatically.

Tanse? He lived, but barely. We lay there, two crippled and miserable creatures. He moaned with all the strength left to him. Perhaps I made his situation worse, protecting him enough to leave him conscious and in what must have been unbearable pain. The crash had broken many of his bones and damaged organs. I needed to repair and regrow myself. If I could. I’d lost so much. I couldn’t think as well as before, could move only nineteen percent of my body. We needed to get to the airship in which I’d arrived, get real treatment in Simulation City. It might take more than we had to just pull ourselves from this wreckage. I grew thin feelers into some of the boys wounds and fed him morphine. I moved deeper into him.

“No, Five,” Tanse said. “Let me die as myself. I want to die one person.” He sounded like an adult now, one free of MACROMOT. What had his other self gone through in that other world? What memories and thoughts had he pulled from the great machine or from his fellow enslaved human minds to make him an adult in mind now?

“You have to trust me, Tanse.”

“No.”

“Do you trust me? I failed you once, I know. I will work for the rest of my life to make that up to you. Do you trust me, Tanse?”

“Yes...” He fell unconscious. He might have said “yes” only because he knew he would die and didn’t want to leave this world with me in a bad way.

The functioning remains of my self moved into and around him. I set the boy’s shattered bones where I could and braced them. Parts of my damaged frame clung to his body. I slid his punctured lungs off of his ribs, reinforced his back where it was broken. I dressed his wounds with cool, thick leaves and staunched the blood loss with calcium and microporous zeolites. I devoured the durium shrapnel in his body to feed the hard shell with which I covered his head. We became one body: animal, vegetable, and
mineral. I gave him all the nutrients his body might need, drained from Kale’s corpse. I roused Tanse with caffeine and glucose and adrenaline.

“Five, no,” the boy begged.

“Be still now. It’s not like before. I’m not MACROMOT, our minds aren’t merged. We will not become one. We remain two, but interdependent. Symbiotic.”

I scraped the crusted blood from the young one’s eyes and slowly, painfully, we stood.

“We are better than two beings. We are better than one being,” I told him. “We are brothers.”

The two of us moved, aching and burning, from the crumpled ship, working around our limitations while learning each other’s gait, adjusting and compensating. Not perfectly, but well enough.

We carried each other.
The Story Behind
Three Kingdoms

Here’s what I wrote about this story in my blog, The One-Thousand:

I can't trace the seed of this story back to a definite date. Not even a year. But I know Process Five was born sometime in the nineties, along with a group of other characters who were not in Three Kingdoms (those others may show up in future stories set in the same world). I’d had an idea to do sort of a superhero story set in a future city. When I say these characters were born, you should know they were the opposite of fleshed-out. They weren't even sketches. They each had one line, describing what made them unique. I was coming up with ideas for heroes which I hadn’t seen before. So, the entirety of Process Five’s character at that time was: “A cyborg that's half-plant, half-robot.” That was it.

And that was it for a few years. Like hundreds of my ideas, Process Five sat in a file, along with other character ideas, a bit of a sketch about the world (which was never used, and a couple of scenes that don't resemble anything that happened in the final story or anything of the final character.

In the early 2002 I discovered Dark Horse comics was looking at unsolicited material for creator-owned works. I thought about what I might do and decided the most comic booky thing I was excited about at the time was the world of Process Five. That was when most of the big decisions were made about the world, the story, and the character. Dark Horse wanted a rundown of the series and the first eight pages of a script.

The series was going to be called Unity, after the planet on which it took place. For almost as long as I've been writing I've been interested in merging opposites, especially the biological and the mechanical. In Unity I was going to explore this in a number of ways, some of which you saw in this story. It was going to be an ensemble comic; Process Five and Tanse were only part of a larger story.

For what became Three Kingdoms I stole a central idea from a disaster of a novel I had attempted years before. The idea was that a powerful computer was pretty amazing in many ways but couldn't compare with humans when it came to imagination. The solution? Enslave some humans and use their imaginations as its own. The twist was these humans weren't just going to be kept floating in tanks. Their bodies and what was left of their minds were going to be put to rudimentary use so the imaginations would have some input on which to draw. These people would be split creatures, neither half aware of the other.
The Jaycourt Farm fell into place then, the people and the miserable conditions. I thought the farmer most likely to pull out of this nightmare existence would be one of the least conditioned to it: a child.

But what did this have to do with Process Five? I thought only a government would be capable of constructing something as complex as P5. But I didn't really want the whole idea of government agents or armies trying to recover missing technology. That seemed old to me. I didn't even want governments. I wanted a frontier system with hundreds of factions, the law being whatever a faction could manage at the end of its guns. Some of these factions might be military labs, cranking out more advanced weapons than the neighbors, either to sell, or to defend itself. That was a small enough unit to be easily wiped off the map so P5 could be autonomous. And the trauma of its awakening in the world could be a key part of its character.

Alan Moore's Swamp Thing was a big influence on P5's more botanical abilities, primarily the crazy-fast growth and the variety of vegetation grown. But I didn't want to copy Swamp Thing outright. I thought of some things I hadn't seen him do and what the addition of robotics could add to the mix. It got so out of control I had something of an unstoppable creature on my hands. How would I put the brakes on this thing? I'd make it a coward! The Jaycourt Farm, populated with humans of bovine-like docility, was the first place process Five could feel safe.

The bad guys in the first issue were mostly imagined as fodder for P5's destructive capabilities. The other key to them was to make them shitty people who were almost trying to out-shitty each other. They were corporate mercenaries and The Mind Company grew out of them and the original computer idea, rather than the other way around.

With a sample script posted by Dark Horse as my formatting guide, I put together a package over the next three months. Understand, I was a salary man, putting in too many hours a week at work, and was also a husband and father of two little kids. On top of that, I was probably working on other writing projects.

I sent it out. Dark Horse rejected it less than a month later. I can't remember the reasons they gave, if any, but I think it was something like a form rejection. C'est la vie. I had other things to work on. I forgot about it for over a year.

In 2003 I learned Marvel was sniffing around for new talent for a revived imprint called Epic, named after their Heavy Metal-inspired Epic Illustrated magazine. The original imprint gave us things like the Dreadstar comic, the excellent Elektra: Assassin mini-series by Frank Miller and Bill Sienkiewicz, and a graphic novel adaptation of William Gibson's Neuromancer. Epic wanted a full script for the first issue and beat sheets for the story arc. Beat sheets were just bullet-pointed lists, issue by issue, of the major plot points. I blew the dust off of Unity and developed it some more.

I figured out the pacing of the first issue by working within a basic six-panel page layout I had decided on while using an intuition honed by reading thousands of comics over the course of a lifetime. I had to move sections around A LOT as I stumbled my way
through it. There was a second story going on in the first issue with other characters who would meet Process Five and Tanse a few issues later. I coordinated the two storylines so scenes ended at the bottom of a page and reveals popped up on the first panel of a page, that sort of thing. I shipped it off in mid-August.

They sent a letter, I think with a color image of Spider-Man at the top, and it wasn't a form letter. They couldn't accept Unity as-is, but if I could make the changes they suggested, they wanted to see it again.

Holy shit.

I'd been in the writing game for more than ten years at that point and this was the best thing from the biggest publisher I'd ever gotten. This could lead to a steady gig! A steady, day-job-quitting gig!

Their changes, if I remember, had to do with slowing down the pace of the story in order to simplify and focus. They were good suggestions. I re-wrote the shit out of that script and sent it back, more excited than I had been in a long time.

I never heard back from them.

After a while, I learned that the guy at Marvel who was reviving the Epic line had been replaced and all his projects had been dumped. Fuuuuuuuuck. I coulda been a contender. I tried the script out again at Marvel proper. No dice.

Time marched on.

In 2005 a close friend of mine had a few dozen business ventures going on in various states of completion and he asked me to write a screenplay for a feature-length animated film. There were no guarantees and no money on the table, but he and I were tight, so I got to work. I fleshed out Unity even more, based on the outline I had made for the story beyond issue one. I did a substantial amount of work, then abandoned it when I thought about the work to come and remembered there were no guarantees and no money on the table. My friend never got back to me on that project anyway.

Eventually I figured I might have been out of luck with the comic (and the screenplay), but I could break the story into smaller pieces and turn them into the kinds of stories that didn't have pictures. I'd start with the first story about Project Five and Tanse. It took a while to convert the sparse sort of stage direction of a script into the detailed narrative of a short story. Then it took many more whiles.

Three Kingdoms was one of the grandest struggles I've ever had with a story. It took years to get it right. I'd attack it, give up, go away, sneak up on it, and attack it again. And again. The plot was there. It had been there since the beginning. It was the conversion from one medium to another where the problems cropped up.

One thing that was tripping me up was the pacing. In comic book form, the whole story was spread over three issues (I had finished issue two and started issue three
somewhere in there, I don't remember why), because a comic was only twenty-two pages long and I had a couple of other storylines worked in there with the first. Even though a story might not be finished in a single issue, you need to plant a dramatic punch at the end of the issue so readers will want to buy the next one. Issue one ended when Process Five kills Norken, makes its decision, and says, “I’m coming Tanse.” If you're reading the comic book, you're like, “Oooo. That was bad-ass, and it’s going to get even worse-ass next issue! I'd better buy that one!” But because of that bit, I had this thing that felt like an ending somewhere in the middle of the story that wasn't an ending. I had to sand that thing down.

My other problem was a point of view problem. In the comic, I sometimes followed the action from the baddies' point of view and I had scenes that took place at The Mind Company before Process Five ever got there. They were small, information-relaying scenes with some characterization work on Kale, Norken, Hewe and a computer jockey who didn't make into the text-only version. That stuff worked great in comic book form but worked terribly in short story form.

Imagine an episode of the TV series *Hart to Hart*. It was a shitty show, but the first one that came to mind. *Hart to Hart* would tell you who the villain was from the get-go. There was no thinking needed on the part of the viewer to solve any mystery. Anyway, the show would often have a scene with the bad guys doing exactly what my bad guy scenes were doing. Let's say some evil dude just finished playing tennis or is drinking wine while looking out on Monte Carlo from his balcony. His lady friend is present and either she or an underling delivers the news that the Harts have been nosing around. The bad guy says, “Let’s make sure the Harts have an accident on their upcoming skiing trip!” (Or gambling excursion, or dog-walking escapade. Those Harts were always doing something!) Evil Dude’s lady friend looks on in horror. This reminds us that the bad guy is bad and keeps us from being surprised when an errant ski boot flies from the trees and nearly misses Jonathan Hart's big ducking head.

You put that type of little bad guy scenelette in a short story and the modern reader is going to say, “What the fuck? What kind of dog shit am I reading here?” Then the reader will crumple up the computer screen and toss it in the waste basket. Granted, my bad guy bits were better and conveyed necessary information, but they still didn't work in the short story version.

What I had was a giant lumpy, lopsided mess. But I had one good thing going for me, and that was friend-of-the-blog Grant Stone. Grant read it and suggested I dump those scenes and stick to one point of view for the whole story. I did it and had to do some remodeling and painting, but I finally made the thing readable.

Although Three Kingdoms was number 95 of The One-Thousand, Unity #1 was number 31. They are different enough from one another, and enough work went into each, that I consider them two different stories.

Incidentally, the main reason the story is told in first-person was to avoid the incessant use of the pronoun “it” when referring to our genderless protagonist. What “it” might refer to can too easily be confused with any number of genderless common nouns
in a story and I'd have to do some unpleasant verbal acrobatics in many instances so that the reader would know that I was talking about Process Five and not a shoe. We rush past the word “it” in a way that we don't rush past “he” or “she.” Using a different genderless pronoun that I had either made up or borrowed from some other writer who had dealt with the same issue would feel clunky to my ear. At least in the case of this story. First-person solves all that with the stealthily genderless “I.”

Big thanks to Fred Coppersmith, who bought this story for Kaleidotrope!
Billions watched a time-shift Valentino make love to a clone Mansfield. Where was our shifting, our cloning, so we might find such passion?
Stars so Sharp They Break the Skin

Ginny’s hand is on Cal’s face. She’s smiling with red-rimmed, squinting eyes. The bedroom is tuned to a light blue-green and her map of Cuba has been shifted onto the east wall, between the two windows. Where it was, there’s now a feed of a sunny backlot baseball field from his home city-state of Detroit, with the sound turned down. He’s not in her bed, same as he’s never been. He’s lying in a hospital bed.

“Hey,” she says. “Relax. I sent for the hospital. Doctor 3000 is here.” Above him, an extension of the doctor, grown from the back of the bed, reaches some of its many limbs toward him.

“Morning, Cal,” it says.

“I promise you, I tried to stay away,” Ginny says. “Didn’t I?”

Doctor 3000 nods its entire body save for the parts inside of Cal. “She did.”

“The hospital’s been out by the pond this whole time. Doctor called and said you were in a coma. So, I told it to bring you here.” Ginny holds up her hand. “I thought I could help.”

“Doctor 3000,” says Doctor 3000. “I didn’t spend four years in 3000 school to be called Doctor.” A green light flashes on the bed to indicate that humor has been employed.

Cal has questions, but all that comes out of him is a hiss and coughing. And coughing. And coughing. Until his head hurts. Doctor 3000 jams a pair of nozzles up Cal’s nose and a numbingly cold mist shoots into his sinuses and lungs. The urge to cough comes less often. Cal lies back, trying to catch his breath but afraid to breathe too deeply, lest the whole thing start again.

Doctor 3000 digs into Cal’s body like a baker kneading dough. “I had to extract quite a bit of potassium from your body before reviving you,” the doctor says. “But don’t worry. Afterward, I shoved it back in, mostly where I found it.”

Cal swallows hesitantly. He tries again.

“. . . last . . . night.”
“I went ice skating last night. By myself. There’s a huge pond out behind the new housing development. They haven’t razed the woods yet and you’re all alone out there.”

He’s back there, in an arena walled by the gnarly old silhouettes of skeletal oaks and ashes. They burst in cauliflower blooms onto the navy sky. Beneath his blades, the surface is smooth and solid obsidian. The only sound the wind carries his way is the barking of a dog shut out of a warm house and its soft comforters, thick with down.

“Ice skating. Really by myself. Three in the morning. The only one on the pond. But it was so nice. I really liked it.”

“It sounds wonderful,” she says, rubbing his arm from the driver’s seat. “We’re here. Be careful. The parking lot is slippery.”

He was a reader, once, but that was before. He goes to the bookstore now because she goes. She dips in and out of random chapters until the display fogs start to gray the whites of her eyes. He reaches into covers, or books of art or photography through poster-sized fields. It’s not that he can’t read anymore, there’s nothing wrong with his brain. It’s just that it doesn’t interest him like it once did.

Ginny finds him in an aisle in the back of the store. She’s got a print-out of a long, white, coffee table book in her hands. “C’mere. Check this out,” she says, whipping her head toward the nearest bench. They sit, denimed legs pressed up against each other. For one second, the smell of her soap is the only thing in his world.

Ginny shows him the cover. “Kintsugi Warriors.” There is a woman against a white background. She’s as black as Ginny, but her skin glistens with oil. She is nude. The tops of her breasts are in view, but not her nipples. Her hard face stares at Cal, daring him to look away. Her shoulders are a rainbow of wires, connecting her body of very real flesh to her arms of very real-looking flesh. It’s a stunning photo and Cal feels a quick loss when Ginny opens the book and spreads it across their laps.

Many of the photos inside follow the theme of the cover. A nude man or woman looking natural in all ways except for the join where prosthetic meets body. Or, strangely, where the original body part meets the body. Even there, bioluminescent tattoos, embedded cable, or an exposed artificial knee tricked out with chrome, show off the join of a reattached limb. In one corner of every picture is printed the subject’s name and rank and service branch. Toward the back, there are pictures of people with completely unnatural looking prosthetics. A sort of zebra leg. A jaw that looks like it came off a car engine.

Cal didn’t have a rank or a service branch. He worked for a company and one day he and some coworkers from other divisions agreed to a kingly benefits package in exchange for trying to destroy one another using weaponized psychic trauma. As a side effect, their tiny war nearly dismantled reality.
Cal looks to Ginny. “What do you think?” she asks. His face is hot and getting hotter as she stares at him. The meat of his bottom is pinched between his bone and the hard bench. He can smell the pumpkin spice issue of People magazine from all the way over here.

“Weird,” he says.

“Is that all?”

“Yeah, I guess. What do you want me to say?” Cal feels awkward enough talking with his doctors about his deformity. To have Ginny, of all people, confront him about it makes him wish they had never saved him.

“I don’t know. I just thought you could maybe relate.” She shows him the cover again, points to the first word. “Kintsugi is about showing off the repairs. Accepting them as part of your history.”

His head says, *Please, can we talk about any goddamned thing in the world beside this?* His mouth says, “I don’t know how that would apply to me. My . . . issues aren’t physical.”

She removes the book from his lap. Replaces it with her hand. “I’m sorry if I offended you.”

“You didn’t. I don’t get it, exactly. That’s all.” His consciousness has been transferred to his left leg, just beneath her hand.

“It’s hard to tell with you,” she says.

“Sorry.”

“Don’t. You don’t have anything to be sorry about. I’m the one who should be sorry.” Her eyes are wet. She leaves for the restroom. He passes the time until her return wondering how he can cut the night short without seeming like he’s been affected by this mortifying exchange.

***

Your brain isn’t the part that got hurt. Your brain should be working properly. But they say things about trauma. Your brain wants to protect you from the shock. Maybe your brain is protecting itself. Maybe it hurt you and is ashamed to face you openly and honestly.
Sometimes you sit alone in your room after dusk, with the aroma of the roast beef under your desk cooking itself in the bag from the store. Your room seems black, but your shaded window on the south side glows weakly. A screen that’s getting ready to put on a show. You try to relax, drift back to when it happened, the injury. Pieces too small to even be called snippets flash. They flash so quickly, you can’t describe them. Like they’re only feelings with light. You’re afraid to try too hard to nail them down, afraid in your desperation you’ll assign something that isn’t true, and the real thing will forever be replaced by the collage you used to cover the truth.

***

He’s standing outside Ginny’s car in snow deep enough that it keeps finding its way under the tongues of his shoes. The car glows in the streetlights like it’s electric blue instead of that dull silver that Ginny is sick and tired of. Cal thinks about going skating again tonight after his world goes to sleep. It’s nice out there. The sky is crisp. The stars are sharp, one even cut him the other night.

When he skates, he holds his arms out to his sides, bent at the elbows, and he rides up and down on the winter wind like that. Even as it goes through his thin pants so he’s cold enough to want to go back inside. But in his head, it’s always, Five more minutes. Five more minutes.

She’s between him and the car. His face smiles before his mind knows why. She’s between him and the car. The little cardboard basket of steak fries from Henry’s is between him and her. The little cardboard basket of steak fries from Henry’s is between Ginny’s gloved hand and Ginny’s ungloved hand, the one she’s eating with, the left one. The ketchup is between the fry and his first finger, the fry is between his teeth, nothing is between Cal and Ginny.

“That was so nice of you,” he says.

“I care about you,” she says. She says it like she loves him. Not like someone she’s looking after. Like someone she once didn’t know and now wants to spend the rest of her life with. He wished that was how she really felt. He wishes he wasn’t only part of a person, that he had something to offer. He looks down at the fries, once more between them, and takes another.

***
Doctor 3000 is skilled enough and kind enough to keep its many arms out from their line of sight while it’s worming around inside Cal’s heart.

“You didn’t go skating last night,” Ginny says. “You’ve been out for quite a while. Before that, you were dead for hours.”

One of Doctor 3000’s eyes shifts above Cal’s head.

“Well, at least for an hour and a half,” Ginny says.

“... how ...”

“How are you alive?”

Cal nods.

“I felt you when it happened. One second I’m in a deep sleep, the next my body has a spasm that throws me out of bed.” She rolls her sleeve up, shows him the dark bruise on her elbow. “It was worse last week. Like I dipped my arm in ink.”

Last week.

* * *

Ginny’s pet bird is a framed portrait of a bird inside a cage in her living room. And she thinks he’s crazy. Cal feels like there’s something to understand about it that he can’t understand. Every third time he thinks about the bird, fear shoots through him. What if it’s a real bird, but appears as a painting to Cal alone? What if it only sounds like a painting? But it doesn’t work like that, his ... deformity. That’s just his weirdness shining through.

Its name is Styler, Ginny’s pet parakeet. The bird in the portrait is a dodo.

Suddenly, her hand is on his face again. He’s standing in her bedroom. She doesn’t say things like, “You went there again,” or “You were gone,” anymore. They both know it past the point of remark. She doesn’t even look at him, just touches his face as she walks by like activating one of those lamps at his grandmother’s place that works by static electricity.

This is what’s damaged. There are stimuli, person-to-person negotiations, which would have previously brought out an aspect of Cal that is now no longer there. He doesn’t exactly black out. His prosthetic kicks in and carries his blank body through the motions. He remembers those bits of life later, like one might remember a poorly constructed advertisement. Then he’s what’s left of himself again.
The prosthetic works as well as one would expect of a prosthetic that had never before been attempted.

***

Ginny’s hands are usually cold. He is always amazed how perfectly American her English sounds and how perfectly Cuban her Spanish sounds. Her bed is smooth, like in a hotel. He’s close enough to her to have seen her bedsprad many times, not close enough to have ever seen her sheets.

Even with her little paunch, her shape’s too good for the garbage she eats. She pours Listerine on her toothbrush before brushing her teeth. She listens to so much piano jazz, they’ll have to tear out the carpets after she leaves to get the sound out. In her face, he can still see the little girl she once was, even as her hair is beginning to grey. Like a banana going from green to brown without getting to enjoy a day or two of just being yellow.

“You’re creeping me out again. Will you please stop staring at me?”

“Sorry,” he says.

***

The war was fought in twelve minutes between twenty-four people on thirty-six sides. Forty-eight was supposed to come into the mix, but the Warporation’s experts got scared and talked peace among themselves before it got that far. The whole thing had been an experiment in what could be done in the field of psychiatric warfare. They hadn’t taken seriously the idea that human consciousness shaped human reality.

The soldiers, Cal and his severely damaged comrades/enemies, had each been about to split into forty-eight subsets of themselves. If the world survived to see what sixty might have been, there probably wouldn’t have been anything in this part of the universe for physics to hang itself on.

He was never good at physics, anyway.
Ginny always talks to Cal’s therapist after a session. Even though he’s sitting in the waiting room, it feels like he’s standing naked in front of both of them while they discuss his shortcomings. The ride home is the quietest trip of the week. He looks out the window like he did when he was a kid, picturing himself out there, running so fast he can keep up with the car, leaping over squat orange personal fueling stations, pop-up kiosks, any obstacle that gets in his way.

***

He’s skating. The wind’s picked up. So damned cold, if he smiles too long, his teeth will crack.

At some point, he was smart enough to change into his boots, but not smart enough to bring his skates. He’s afraid if he goes back home now, the moment will be lost. So, he does it old-school, slides across the ice on his soles, like when he was a kid. Before his mom got a pair of hand-me-downs from a cousin in a state he’d never seen. It’s not the same. But it carries the past with it, which is something. And it’s infinitely better than turning back for home.

***

Cal is overwhelmed by the idea of Ginny. Gin and Tonic Ortiz. In part, it’s the love he feels for her. The all-consuming schoolboy love he’s never felt for anyone before, where even his thoughts outside of their shared world try and introduce themselves to the idea of her. What would she think of his little socialist city-state back in Michigan? Their ideas of family as armor? How would she feel about the dog he’s been wanting to make? Would the dog get along with Styler?

The other part of the overwhelm is that he’s able to love this way at all. Cal had assumed this was one of the things he’d lost in the war. At the beginning, there were lots of things he was worried he’d lost, but each thing he’d fretted over popped up—rapidly at first, then with less frequency—until this love was maybe the last thing he’d been concerned with.

It was wonderful. He was happy to have it in his life. To have her in his life, even if nothing more would ever come from it than eating fries outside in a snow-smothered parking lot. Or sitting in her bedroom on a Sunday afternoon when nothing’s going on except for bacon-and-egg breakfasts (she calls his daily oatmeal a rut) and the Sunday supplement read by glass-filtered sunlight.
The best parts are when he’s the most dead. When he keeps what he is at the front of his mind the entire time he’s with her. When hope isn’t a thing. The worst parts are when she makes him forget what he is and then he remembers. Cal sees humiliation as a laughing kickboxer who never ever misses his stomach.

***

Your world is black until you think you’ve gone blind. You remember yourself for a flash, when you were whole, as clearly as if it was a photo. And then it’s the war and EVERYTHING is happening. EVERYTHING that has ever happened or will ever happen is taking place in that instant. EVERYTHING crushed into the space of a single confining universe. You snap back to the present. The stars leap back from out of nowhere, they pierce you like an electric shock.

Your heart races; you’re standing still in the middle of a frozen pond. You had forgotten about a terror so strong it could shut off your mind. Knowing that it really happened, your mind wants to shut off again. It gives you shivers the cold can only envy.

Your feet scoot across the ice like a child’s. You make it to the edge, you find your way to your car, you sit behind the wheel, wondering if you’ll be in any state to drive in ten minutes time. Or ten days. You tell the car to drive you home. It hasn’t driven in so long, it fumbles for its own keys.

Your brain has been on your side all along.

***

Cal’s personality was wounded during the war. A piece of it had to be amputated. He can’t point to where it was or tell you what it did. It’s like . . . The whole thing is a swirling, morphing mass and the way he feels its absence is that it’s . . . It’s like when it was whole, it filled the container it was in. And now it doesn’t quite fill it. And sometimes, when he shifts suddenly, the imbalance throws me off. Him off.

***
“Sooo . . .” Ginny starts, on their way to the Siblings in Arms Charity Shop, “are you going to tell me what happened to your face?”

Of course. Cal stops short in the middle of the intersection. Opens his coat, lifts his shirt. The tiny little cuts that dot his face are mirrored all over his body.

“Do you get it?” he asks.

Ginny moves her head slowly back and forth. She looks for cars. It’s a quiet town on a Sunday morning. “I don’t. You, like, walked through a thorn bush naked?”

“No, it’s the stars. Last night, while I was skating, they jumped out at me, so sharp they cut me. You don’t understand. The universe is how it is because that’s how we choose to see it. The war messed with some of us. Sometimes things work differently for us.”

She’s staring at him.

“See Orion?” He passes his hand over his tight stomach. “I mean, I know it’s backwards, but that only makes sense, right?”

Her fingers go to his red speckled skin, the fingers she eats fries with. The soft ridges of those fingertips catch on the broken Braille of his canvas. Every nerve he has crackles.

“You’re saying the stars cut you, and it wasn’t something you did to yourself, Cal?”

There’s a car horn. A vehicle swerves around them. The driver offers helpful advice. “Get the fuck outta the road!”

“I’m not a guy who wants to hurt himself, Gin. I’ve been hurt enough.” Some anger he’s easily kept in check for months rises from the swamp of his psyche.

She looks from his torso to his eyes. From his jaw to his ear to his eyes. From his ungloved hand to his eyes. There’s something inside of Ginny that he’ll never find if he has a lifetime to look. She seems fragile again. When he talks about himself, she takes it like he’s talking about her. All he wants is to hold her in his arms. He can’t do this anymore.

“You know, Ginny. You don’t have to be here. I mean, if you’ve got a better life going on somewhere, go to it.”

“You want me to go?” she says. He can barely hear her over the screech of tires somewhere nearby.

“I’m just saying, I think I can do this. I mean, as well as I’m ever going to. You don’t have to . . . mind me.”

“What the hell are you talking about, ‘mind’ you?” More horns. Shouting.
“I know the things you say to me, all the nice things, they’re what my therapist tells you to say to me.”

“What?” Car doors are slamming.

“I’ve always known. I know I seem stupid because I’m off, Ginny, but I’m not stupid. I know you have to say that stuff so I’ll, I don’t know, heal faster, I guess. But you know what? It hurts. It hurts like hell. It’s like you’re teasing me with this. You don’t think being alone for the rest of my life, being like this, is torture enough? You have to remind me every day I can’t be with a woman? You’re killing me, Ginny. I can’t take this anymore.” It’s hard to make his point with the guys screaming in his face.

“...no...” Some helpful hand is on her arm, leading her back to the sidewalk.

“Please, just go. If there’s anything in there that’s ever respected me, even a little bit, please leave me alone and give me some peace.” Cal’s too big a guy to be shoved, but he’s steadily pushed out of the first traffic jam this intersection has ever seen outside of a collision.

Cal never raised his voice, he never swore. In her mind, he screamed at her. In his mind, too. Tears run in wobbly rivulets to their jaws, dropping to their smooth coats to shine until they’re thawed. When he’s done, she stays. He’s the one who leaves, pushing through a group of people who are just trying to figure out what the hell is going on.

***

His pension from the Warporation covers his bills. To get out of the house, he volunteers at the charity shop, sorting donated clothes. Throwing away the stuff that’s too torn or soiled to be sold.

Dennis sounds mad at Cal, but Cal isn’t bothered. He doesn’t view Dennis as an employer but as an equal. Besides, he’s got a few other things on his mind today.

“Your reject pile is way too big, bro!” Dennis says so the shoppers in the front can hear him. “People are gonna want to buy most of this stuff. They can get the stains out or dye them. Sew ’em up, patch ’em, stick on a coupla buttons. It’s not up to us.”

“I didn’t think people did that anymore,” Cal says, quite honestly.

“You make too much money to know what people do. All you’re doing here is keeping food out of needy people’s mouths and overworking the incinerator.”

Cal wasn’t aware the rejects went to an incinerator, but looking at them again, it seems right that they do.
You sit alone in your room, but it doesn’t mean as much because you’re alone all the time now. The squirrels that spent their October trying to scratch their way down from the attic are winter-silent tonight. The only sounds they make—slow breaths, soft breaths, slow breaths—are too quiet to work their way through your ceiling. You hear only the slicing wind outside the window, the vibrations, pitching up and down, of faraway traffic. Most of an order of Henry’s is stinking up the room, having been tipped into the wastebasket beneath your desk.

The walls radiate cold through their goosebump pores. There’s a space heater in the corner for nights exactly like this, but you’ll shiver for now because the orange glow would reveal too much. You look longingly once more to the pale window shade. You try to relax, drift back to when it happened, the injury.

The only thing you see is Ginny’s face.

Again.

Again.

***

He prints an analytical motor, which is free if it doesn’t work. He asks it to determine why he cries sometimes for no reason. Three days later it tells him, he cries whenever he hears a voice make the “ntk” sound, as in “don’t care,” or “Bundt cake.” Cal sobs uncontrollably as he transfers his money to the motor’s designer.

***

He walked in on her in the bathroom once. Ginny was on the toilet, brushing her teeth violently, pajama bottoms puddled about her feet. The room smelled of Listerine and pee. She continued to brush, watching him with a mild curiosity while foam dribbled from her mouth onto her dark, unshaven legs. She looked so lovely. Her apartment felt more like a home than anything he’d ever had back at his place.
As cold as it felt in his room, it isn’t so cold out here. The wind has calmed. The ice is
dark in the moonlight. The water below has crept closer to the surface. It’s been a couple
of weeks since Cal’s been out on the pond. He’s been afraid, remembering the
EVERYTHING. But tonight, his soul has turned dark enough that he’s ready to throw
himself back into the fray, into the EVERYTHING, into the war, into oblivion.

He’s skating.

Not the way he did before. He doesn’t feel the good things he felt before. He doesn’t
like it. But then, he’s not skating the way he did before, in wide arcs, lapping alongside
the snow-thick banks, light blue beneath the predawn sky. This morning he’s racing,
racing, racing. A straight line. Toward the center of the pond.

The stars are not out in the numbers they had been. Blinded by the light of the half
moon, many of them have shrunk back, behind the curtain folds of deep space.
Centimeters beneath Cal’s skates, bubbles of air wiggle like guppies. The ice turns wet.

He leaps into the air.

He comes down.

He goes through.

The shock is immediate. His body flushes the air from its lungs. Whatever his
earthly concerns were moments ago, they are so far gone, they might as well never have
been. There is only now. A nervous system so overcome with sensation it pushes past
agony into physical confusion. Everything is bad. Everything is so fucking bad. He isn’t
given the mercy of knowing it will all be over in a moment. There is something more
than black. A complete negation of the senses.

He is in the twelfth minute of the war. He is meeting Ginny for the first time across
the field of mind. In the twelfth minute of the war. He is whole for the last moment of
his life. Whole or not, his mind is so damaged at this point in the conflict, he doesn’t
really understand that Ginny is the enemy until she is tearing him open. For a quick
second, Cal is two people, his current self, and a tiny proto-human something else, both
screaming and trying to understand what is happening to them. Ginny’s face twists into
the shock he should be feeling. Her wounded mind bleeds into the hole she’s made in
him.

Ginny and Cal, together, become the most beautiful thing there is.

***
“I’m sorry if you were trying to die. I was so freaked, I called before considering your feelings.”

He shakes his head. “. . . was . . .” shallow breath “. . . trying.” breath breath, “Not now.”

He stops to gather his strength. She waits patiently for the next hour. “I remember,” he says. “What happened. The war.”

She puts a hand on his arm. “I don’t. Not most of it. And I don’t want to remember.”

“But you remembered me.”

“I did. You were the one good thing.”

“Why did you let me think . . .”

“I figured you’d hate me. I maimed you. Turns out you hated me anyway.” She laughs a little.

“I don’t hate you,” he says.

“Funny way to show it.”

“I just couldn’t understand . . . how anyone would want to be with me. The way I was. Am. Thank you.”

***

She wants to show him her work. And so, here they stand on the surface of a pond that is frozen solid while nearby thermometers read 52 degrees Fahrenheit; T-shirt weather to the locals. The hole where Cal fell through has been patched by something that looks like an enormous snowflake, four feet across. He rubs his foot over it. It feels no different from the ice around it.

“You don’t think people will wonder this summer why a pond is frozen?”

Ginny laughs. “Who cares if they do? People aren’t our bosses. We’re all co-managers.” She stomps her boot heel against the hard floor below.

He smiles. There’s plenty of time for another cold snap, but they stand out there for a while, surveying the dry, brown landscape, breathing the warm air, letting spring enter them.
“Come skate with me, Ginny.”

***

His doctor suggests that, after some light broth this afternoon, Cal should take a stab at getting those muscles moving again.

Cal reaches tentatively for Ginny’s hand. She meets him more than halfway. Pulling it over nutritive sacs attached to him like leeches, and the squirming remote monitors of Doctor 3000, he rests her hand upon his freshly damaged chest. He closes his eyes. They’re both still.

“Oh!” Ginny says, pulling her hand away. “I wanted to tell you, I’m going to be a grandmother!”

?????

How the hell long has he really been out?

She projects an image from her palm. He blinks to focus. Squints. The image is of her birdcage. She zooms in, far below Styler’s perch. There, at the bottom of the cage, sits a tiny framed portrait of an egg.
The Story Behind
Stars so Sharp They Break the Skin

As I mentioned in the afterword for “Out of Breath in a Sharp Red Suit,” the germ of the idea for this story came from a master plots article I saw online. This was the second story I wrote from that list, I was happy with the way both of them turned out. I should try writing the other eight! I think the idea behind this one was inner transformation. I added a personal twist.

“Stars so Sharp” was inspired by an amazing woman who was really into me. In my opinion, she was too amazing to be into me. It was territory unknown to me, and it took months for her to convince me that she wasn’t putting me on. (Do people still say, “putting me on?”) If she had said it was because I was so attractive or athletic, I wouldn’t have bought it. She told me she was into nerds, and that she was into the same things about me that I’m confident about. Bam. The way to a man’s heart is through his ego.

My best stories begin not with an idea or a character, but with a mood. I didn’t start this one with a mood (sometimes I’m dumb) I tried doing a straight-ahead story with bland people saying bland things. I might have gotten a few hundred words in, then decided it sucked and I wandered away to watch squirrels. Shortly after that my daughter visited. I’d rather hang out with her than write, but I took my netbook along to the television room to peck around while we discussed the minutiae of our lives. She was binging The Carmichael Show, and I got back to my story while avoiding the warmed-over garbage that I’d already written. I started . . . with a mood.

It was the deadened melancholy of a guy who’d given up on having a meaningful and deep relationship with a woman long ago. He was skating by himself in the dead of winter, in the dead of night, finding the only type of peace he could attain. I wrote it in first person. After a few paragraphs, I went to a third person scene that centered on some French fries. After that, why not a second person scene?

I thought I might be onto something because it began to look to me like the kind of story other people write. Those weird people I didn’t quite understand who sold stories regularly.

Cal feels out of sorts because I often feel out of sorts.

My head often feels funky, maybe because of some combination of blood sugar levels, fatigue, inner ear issues, blood pressure, and maybe some other problems I haven’t yet thought up. As I edit this, I’m waiting on test results that I hope will make some things clear. That bit with the personality rolling around in a container it doesn’t quite fill, and the resulting imbalance is a weird thing I’ve often felt in recent years,
especially when I’m tired. It feels like there’s a weight rolling about in my skull that throws my head off balance. Something bad is probably going on there. Another thing is, when my head is weird, I feel like I’m one level more removed from reality than I’m used to. It’s similar to watching someone else playing a video game, except I’m in control of a car rolling down the road and it’s terrifying. But, hey, what are you going to do?

And that’s the origin of Cal’s disconnection from the world. And so, the person shifts, the tense shifts, and we are no longer tied to the petty constraints of chronology. The weirdness is baked right in.

Speaking of weirdness . . . that war, right? I was simply channeling my inner Grant Morrison and doing whatever crazy thing felt interesting. We have damaged veterans that aren’t getting exactly what they need from the people responsible for their damage. I complained about this very sort of thing in the afterword of “Rubble People.”

The EVERYTHING was inspired by a nightmare I had as a kid. Maybe I was around twelve years old. In 2006 I wrote a piece of flash fiction that describes it called, “Pressing the Button.” Here it is for your edification:

PRESSING THE BUTTON

The three of us floated in our spacesuits. The three of us floated in an endless grey void that used to be the universe. Nothing else existed save for the machine in the middle of our little group. Roughly cubicle, it was about eighteen inches to a side. I couldn't remember who my companions were or even who I was. All I knew was that the machine would bring back everything. I thought myself a manufactured being, programmed for this one vitally important task. Three of us floated. The machine had only one button, large enough to fit three fingers. We all pushed together. Everything happened at once. The whole universe happened at once. Every color, every sound, every happening. There was no Bang from a single point. Chaos came evenly distributed and instant. Needless to say, I went insane. What happened next, I'll never know. That is the whole of my existence: two minutes. Floating in space, going insane. I don't replay it over and over. It just is and always is. Reinforces my belief that I'm manufactured, perhaps an AI in a program that froze when my companions and I tried to populate our vast machine with a reality.

Floating. Insanity. That is all there is.

It took you longer to read that then it did for me to have the dream. Scared the shit out of me.

We see through the thin film of reality to the chaos that bubbles beneath. We shape our own realities, like believing people have to be with us when, in fact, they want to be
with us. Like believing we’re unloved when we are indeed loved. Like believing we’re unlovable when it’s simply not so.

This was number 164 of the One-Thousand. Thanks to Jason Sizemore from Apex Magazine for picking this one up!
Passing Around the Hat

That’s it! Thanks so much for reading. If you liked these stories and would like to help me produce more like them (or, perhaps, even better ones), there are a few things you can do to help me.

Recommend this book to other people you think might enjoy it, or might be on the edge of enjoying it, or might enjoy just one story in it (It’s a giraffe, see? And she’s—get this—she’s washing the dishes! I know, right?). This book is free, so one hopes it won’t have to be a hard sell.

Review this book on Amazon, Goodreads, wherever else you might have gotten this book, or your own blog or podcast, or something else I can’t think of right now.

Buy one of the other e-books I’m involved in in the Me-Books section, just a few pages away.

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Access to my old subscription show, Beware the Elitist Mango!

My classic flash fiction illustrated by me, one of the worst artists working today!

Some of my never-before published flash fiction!
My unpublished or nigh-impossible to find short stories!

And stories written by me, specifically for you!

I have to stop now, because I’m out of exclamation marks. Much love to you. Here’s to future get-togethers.

Cheers,

Matt
Acknowledgments

Thanks to the editors who liked these stories, believed in them, gave me money for the right to publish them, and spread them to a wider audience. Big thanks to Fred Coppersmith, Brendan Hickey, Melanie Lamaga, Nathan E. Lilly, Jason Sizemore, David Steffen, and all of their teams. Please support their magazines, everyone!

Thanks to my usual gang of dear friends and advisors: John DeNardo, Kamesa El Khoury, Mari Ness, Dan Rabarts, Grant Stone, Christie Yant, and Gord Zajac. Thank you forever to the late Emily Barlow, to whom this book is dedicated.

Thanks to all my Patreon people, past and present: Dan Birkel, John Birkel, Robyn Bradshaw, Ellen and Michael Cronin, Mary Crook, Jim DeVona, Kevin Divoll, Ian Fagan, Randall Godso, Simon Hildebrandt, Dwight Illk, Ben J, Pete Jones, Fred Kiesche, Zivan Krisher, Josh Leuze, Lynchey, Tina McCormick, Lyle McNeal, Christopher Munroe, Steve Platt, Nathaniel Rich, Diane Severson, Laurence Simon, Dana Smith, David St-Denis, Keith Teklits, Josh Thomson, the folks at Trundle Manor, Natalie Vincent, Logan Waterman, Craig Webster, and Mark Zanfardino. Some of you guys have been with me for years, long before Patreon was even a thing, and your generosity has given me the breathing room to do what work I’ve been able to do. Thank you for putting up with my constantly-changing mind and embarrassing slack-assedness. I haven’t even met most of you in person, but you guys are like family.

Thanks, most of all, to all the pissed-off people I forgot to mention here.

Sorry.
The Dritten Doesen: Some of the Least Reasonable Stories of Matthew Sanborn Smith is a collection of twelve of my craziest stories. These tales contain frogs used as public transportation! Stray thoughts captured in neural nets! Multi-gorillas! Electric feathers! People swap body parts, cities behave naughtily, and snails are sprayed all over the place. Why aren’t you already reading this book?

Beauty Belongs to the Flowers, from Tor.com, concerns a classic love triangle in a near-future Japan: a girl, a boy, and a robot. Miho could certainly win back Ichiro. All she needs is a little hair dye. And some plastic surgery. A bit of pore-sealing, a touch of bone shaving, and she could be like Aimi, the perfect manga doll. If only Miho wasn’t a flat-broke teenager. But she needs to make a move fast. If her father—body ravaged by pharmaceutical nanos gone wild—dies, he’s going to take the whole family down with him.

Ridiculous and poignant, frightening and hopeful, Fluff and Buttons on the Teddy Bear Range tells the story of Jack, a bear with little left to live for, but driven on by hate for the dark race that lives just beyond the villages of his people. Having lain dormant for some time, the creatures have returned to feed. Jack’s last hope is to protect the life of Froo Froo, the she-bear who once loved him. But Froo Froo doesn’t want protection, least of all from him.

You’ll find my flash fiction story, Simon Says, in the anthology, Baby Teeth: Bite-sized Tales of Terror. It’s full of tiny stories about creepy kids. All proceeds from the book go to Duffy Books in Homes, which gets books to kids who need them!

Look for these online, most likely Amazon, but some other places too!
About the Author

Matthew Sanborn Smith was born and raised in southern New England but has spent his adulthood in South Florida. His fiction has appeared at Tor.com, Apex Magazine, Nature, Chizine, and Aliterate, among others. His story, “Beauty Belongs to the Flowers,” received an honorable mention in Gardner Dozois’ twenty-ninth annual Year’s Best Science Fiction collection. He is the keeper of the Beware the Hairy Mango podcast in all its iterations.

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