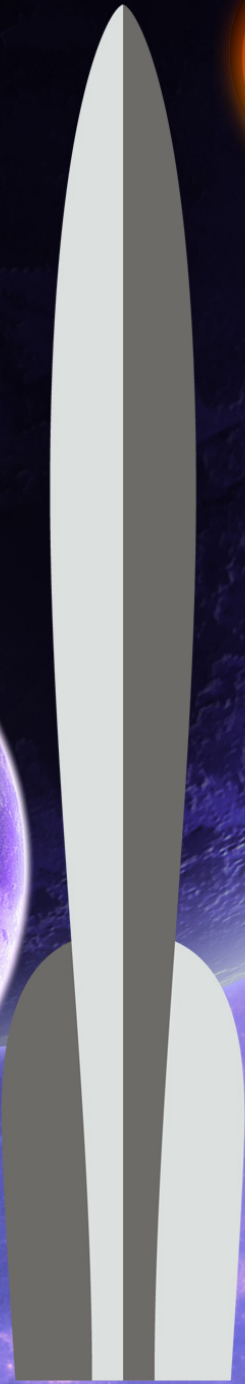


# ESCAPE POD



HUGO AWARD<sup>SM</sup>

2017 VOTER PACKET

BEST SEMIPROZINE: ESCAPE POD

edited by Mur Lafferty, S.B. Divya, and Norm Sherman,  
with assistant editor Benjamin C. Kinney



# Escape Pod Hugo Packet 2017

All of Escape Pod's stories from 2017 are available for free in audio and text at [escapepod.org](http://escapepod.org).

This packet includes a representative selection of stories, hosts, and narrators from 2017, in the following formats: mp3, PDF, epub, mobi. Readers can also find it online at <http://escapepod.org/2017-hugo-voter-packet/>.

## Contents

1. Escape Pod 560: "Run" by C.R. Hodges (Original)  
Narrated by Eden Royce.  
Hosted by Alasdair Stuart.  
Published January 26, 2017
2. Escape Pod 566: "Honey and Bone" by Madeline Alvey (Artemis Rising; Original)  
Narrated by Tina Connolly.  
Hosted by Alex Acks.  
Published March 9, 2017
3. Escape Pod 579: "Texts From the Ghost War" by Alex Yuschik (Original)  
Narrated by Adam Pracht & Trendane Sparks.  
Hosted by Tina Connolly.  
Published June 9, 2017
4. Escape Pod 593: "Planetbound" by Nancy Fulda (Reprint)  
Narrated by S.B. Divya & Trendane Sparks.  
Hosted by Mur Lafferty.  
Published September 14, 2017
5. Escape Pod 597: "Ms. Figgle-DeBitt's Home For Wayward A.I.'s" by Kurt Pankau (Original)  
Narrated by Matt Dovey.  
Hosted by S.B. Divya.  
Published October 12, 2017

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## Escape Pod 560: “Run”

January 26, 2017

Author : C.R. Hodges

Narrator : Eden Royce

Host : Alasdair Stuart

Audio Producer : Adam Pracht

“Run” is an Escape Pod original.

<http://escapepod.org/2017/01/26/ep560-run/>

The claxon blares three times: *all clear*. We file out of the underground shelter and up the serpentine lava tube. Our semi-annual hibernation drill, bureaucratic gibberish for *run down to the emergency shelter and hide*, is now monthly. I’m all for avoiding nuclear annihilation, but I wish the drills weren’t scheduled so close to lunar sunset.

I jostle my way toward the front of the long line headed for the surface modules. It’s been fourteen Earth days since I’ve talked to my best friend. Sure we could have emailed or texted, even from two-hundred and thirty-nine thousand miles away, but that would be cheating. We’re the Interplanetary Morse Code Club. Sally is President, Earth District; I’m Vice President of Lunar Operations. It’s a small club.

In the beginning, back in fourth grade, we used pulsed lasers with computer translators operating at one megabit per second. But now that’s cheating too. The club rules are clear now: lasers are allowed, but only with hand modulation. I use a thermal tile, painted pink, scavenged from the silly dollhouse Mom built for my fifth birthday. Sally uses a kayak paddle. Means we can only communicate when it’s dark on both worlds, and here on the moon it takes literally a fortnight for the stupid sun to set.

I make it back to our family’s module with two minutes to spare. Facing the video feed from the twelve-inch telescope I’ve positioned outside in the cold vacuum, I watch the abrupt nightfall as the terminator line passes overhead. While the telescope is slaved to my computer and can track automatically, I’m equally adept at tracking via joystick. I find the bright lights of Denver, then scroll west to the tiny mountain town of Frisco, lit up as well. A nudge east to a small hilltop overlooking the lake, with only one house on it. Gently scrolling as the Earth turns beneath us, I wait. It’s an hour past dusk Colorado time, the earliest we can see each other’s signals.

“H-e-l-l-o,” I code, waving the tile between the penlight laser and the viewport. I’ve put an anti-reflective coating on the glass but the reflection still illuminates the interior bulkhead of my sleeping module. *Di di di dit. Dit.* And so forth. No nineteenth century Western Union operator would have quaked in her boots about losing her job to my blazing speed, but I am the reigning lunar champ.

I’m not directly signaling Earth, of course. A homebuilt sensor duct taped to the telescope detects my dots and dashes and feeds the code into an industrial laser mounted coaxially with the telescope. I’m also the club’s chief engineer. Originally the rules required me to stand outside in a moon suit waving the tile, but Mom nixed that one. After some parliamentary debate, the club amended section thirty-eight of the bylaws to allow my indirect hand modulation.

No reply. While I wait, I do a quick check for inbound space traffic between Earth and the Glasnost Peace Lunar Cooperative Settlement, aka the Colony. Home. While satellites orbiting the Earth are impossible to see with my limited telescope, anything with a rocket engine is visible to those of us who know where to look. The weekly space freighter fires its stage four boosters and heads our way. My stepdad is in charge of Colony logistics. He does a good job, and sometimes smuggles in a little chocolate for me.

Returning my view to Frisco, I try another “Hello.”

“Hi Ivana.” Sally is on station.

“Good evening,” I signal. “Missed you.”

The red light from Sally’s laser, tiny but discernible, blinks on and off. *Dah dah*. And so on. “Missed you too,” Sally signals.

Text speak is banned, as are contractions. Only prosigns, the traditional Morse code abbreviations, are allowed. Section twelve of the bylaws.

“Is your mom home?” I ask.

“Yes.” Means we can only talk for fifteen minutes, then Sally will have to do her homework. Sixth grade isn’t as tough on Earth as it is here on the moon, but her mom still insists on study time. And Morse code doesn’t bring in any extra credit points, no matter how proficient.

We’re up to twenty words a minute, which gives us a few hundred words in total, allowing for the speed of light latency. We cover club business, boys—apparently they’re cuter in Frisco than in the Colony—and finally politics.

Politics is one of the reasons we communicate in code. Russia and the United States are beyond saber rattling. The Colony was originally a semi-utopian American and Russian co-op, until palladium was discovered in the Maskelyne crater. Now we’re caught in the middle. Discussing the pending war is a big no-no on all three sides, and interplanetary radio waves are routinely snooped by the NSA, the newly-revived KGB and the embryonic Lunar Security Agency. Anyone with a telescope and a dog-eared Young Pioneer or Girl Scout handbook can eavesdrop on our conversations, but there is an advantage of being so retro as to be ignored.

“Dad got called up,” Sally says. Her father is a major in the United States Army Reserve. My father is back on Earth too, in St. Petersburg. Sally politely calls him a sanitary engineer. He cleans up trash in the subway when he isn’t too drunk to make it to work.

Mom and I live on the moon with my stepdad and Stepjerk, aka my stepbrother François. Everyone thinks Mom is a Russian spy. They’re probably right. My stepdad is almost certainly a spy too, of the French variety. But he’s a really nice guy, for a stepdad, and all he drinks is a little wine with dinner.

“Ouch,” I say, pausing inadvertently, using up precious bandwidth. “I hope he stays safe.”

“You stay safe too.” Her family is about as safe as one can get in America: nine thousand feet in elevation, prevailing winds blowing east out of Denver and a mountain range in between. But the Colony, located in the Sea of Tranquility twenty miles from where mankind first set foot on the moon a century ago, has a giant target painted on it. Probably from both sides.

We do have a secret. The first explorers discovered a lava cave beneath the lunar regolith. Our bomb shelter now, it takes an hour for us all to make it past the blast gates deep underground. Both the United States and Russia placed nuclear-tipped drones in lunar orbit during the last crisis. They can be commanded to crash dive into the Colony’s dome. Stepjerk, a freshman at Armstrong University, says his professors have calculated that it will take seventy-two minutes for either country to annihilate us. Gives us a small buffer, assuming our detector arrays spot the deorbit burns in time.

I’ve never told Sally about the cave. Talking about it is the only high crime in the Colony. “We will survive,” I say, hoping she will not ask how, yet feeling treasonous nonetheless.

“Run for the cave if the time comes,” she says.

So much for our secret. “How did you know?”

A long pause, far beyond the accursed lag second.

“There is a video on Moontube.”

A poorly kept secret.

“Supposed to be —”

I stop, the pink tile held chest high. A bright flash on Earth, east coast of the United States. Five seconds later another. The evacuation alarm goes off, bright lights and a siren, followed by that awful recording. “Please proceed in an orderly fashion to the cave. Walk, do not run. Please proceed . . .”

“CL,” I code, the prosign for going off the air, then quickly add, “luv u.” I drop the tile as Mom grabs my hand. We run, section twelve and the incessant commands be damned. This is no drill.



The evacuation down to the cave takes us fifty-six minutes and forty-three seconds. As the blast doors creak shut, there’s a group sigh, all seven thousand of us.

We wait. I tap my fingers on the lava ropes that snake across the floor of the cave. *What hath god wrought?* Samuel Morse’s original message. Seems appropriate. Doesn’t help.

Stepjerk expounds on his seventy-two minutes theory to anyone who will listen. Too many do. At seventy-one minutes someone starts softly counting down. We don’t actually know if the cave is deep enough and, of course, we will be trapped here for months at best, entombed forever at worst. We have food, water and air for a year max. *Sixty, fifty-nine . . .*

As the count drops below thirty, more voices join in. Chanting softly, like in church.

At two everything goes quiet.

Ten seconds past zero Stepjerk whispers in my ear, “Boom.”

I ignore him. A half minute later he opines that his professor did not say that the explosion would be at exactly seventy-two minutes.



After two days the mayor declares *all clear* and we return to the surface. There’s a full spectrum blackout but news filters in via the Colony militia. Eight nuclear strikes says one rumor, twenty-three another. Moscow and Washington, St. Petersburg and New York, those are given. My father is likely dead, although my stepdad holds my hand and says, “Subways are underground, Ivana. A good thing, *oui?*”

I hug him even though I fear in my heart he’s wrong.

“Denver?” I ask Mom, as we’re heading back to our module.

“I haven’t heard,” she says. Her eyes say it is a lie, but then again she hasn’t tried to cover up St. Petersburg. Part of me is sure Sally is alive in any case, shielded by the Continental Divide; part of me fears the worst.

Part of me is horrified that I’m more worried about her than about my father.

The broad Pacific is facing us by the time I activate my telescope. It looks peaceful, until the pyres that were Tokyo and Shanghai swing into view. It isn’t just America versus Mother Russia anymore.

The sirens go off again before I can see Europe, much less North America. A rumor spreads like a hairline fracture in an oxygen tank that the Russians have obliterated our detector arrays. Panic ensues, and it takes us over sixty-nine minutes.



The rumor is unfortunately true. Twenty days later the mayor reluctantly allows us back up to the surface. The detector arrays are indeed down, and we’re naked. I camp by the telescope, waiting a little less than an hour for the Rocky Mountains to show up. Denver isn’t burning, but just to its south floats a huge cloud of ash over where NORAD must once have been.

I cry all day. Transmissions with Earth are severed and we’re five days till lunar nightfall, when I can communicate with Sally. Attempt to communicate.

The longest five days of my life, made worse by daily evacuation drills. We're running now, but orderly, and we have it down to forty-nine minutes. On the fourth day a French space freighter—thanks to my stepdad, I suspect or at least hope—lands. With much-needed rations but also the news that both the Americans and Russians have moved their drones into lower orbits. It will only take fifty-three minutes for them to annihilate us, or so the University experts are telling everyone. Not that it matters. With our detectors down, as Stepjerk is keen to remind me, we're as blind as cave lichen. Fifty spotters are deployed with binoculars to scan the heavens manually, but deorbit burns are much tougher to see looking at the pointy end of a drone missile rather than at its fiery butt.

Lunar nightfall is only an hour ahead of Denver coming into range, so I wait up.

"Hello," I signal.

No reply.

"Sally?"

When I re-sight the telescope I realize that there are almost no lights in Colorado, outside of the hellacious glow over NORAD. Sally can't operate her laser. Even if she is alive.

Then I see something, the color off and way too dim. Four long segments of vaguely orange light, well beyond any dot or dash. Yet uniform in length and spacing. I wait, holding my breath, hoping that it's her, just signaling very slowly. Another overlong dot, followed by an excruciatingly long dash. *Di di di dit. Di dah.* "Hi."

"Sally?" I reply.

"Yes." Of course it's her.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes. Bonfire. Big mirror. Mom helping," she signals, over the course of eight long minutes. "You okay?"

"Yes. Except for my . . ." I stop, set down the tile and wipe my eyes. ". . . father. St. Petersburg."

"I am sorry." Her speed is improving.

"Sally, I'm scared. We're blind here," I blurt aloud, then remember to signal it, sans contractions.

"Blind?"

*How to say this?* I wonder. Carefully I signal, "We will not know when we need to go running."

"SN." The prosign for *understood*.

"Time for bed," Mom says softly, a hand on my shoulder. Weary, like I'm supporting her.

"Just let me say goodbye to Sally." I give Mom's hand a quick squeeze.

She nods, a wry smile on her haggard face.

"I have to go to sleep. Stay safe. Good night. CL."

"You to—"

My finger on the off switch, I wait for the second *o*. A budding journalist, Sally never misspells anything.

Nothing more. "Bedtime," Mom says.

"Just a minute," I say. To Sally I signal, "Everything okay?"

A flurry of blinks, *Di di di dah dah dah di di dit*. All one control character, without pauses between the letters, just like the prosign is supposed to be sent. Just like it has been sent, ever since the days of steamships, in times of imminent peril. The international—the interplanetary—distress code: SOS.

A short pause as I hold my breath, waiting for another flash of light, another city destroyed. But two seconds later there come more blinks. Slower. Deliberate.

*Di dah dit.* "R . . ."

"Bed." Mom is tugging on my upper arm now, but my feet are rooted to the flooring.

*Di di dah.* ". . . u . . ."

The infinite cold of space is seeping through the bulkhead walls.

“Ivana.” In that drawn-out, three-syllable parental fashion.

I ignore her, staring at Earth, at Colorado, at Sally’s campfire.

*Dah dit.* “. . . n.”

No earthbound telegrapher would have ever abandoned her station without acknowledging, even in such dire times. “SN,” I reply, signaling so fast the tile flies out of my hand with the final *dit*, shattering against the bulkhead.

“Mom,” I yell, as I grab her wrist. “Run!”

—

CL



### Host commentary by Alasdair Stuart:

We talk a lot, on PseudoPod, my regular haunt, about William Friedkin’s definition of horror. Now, Big Will knows a little about horror and the definition of his I always really liked was is the idea that: True horror is seeing something approach.

We’ve gone round and round on exactly how right he is a few times but it’s a solid definition. I’d argue the true definition of heroism is just as complex as that. Seeing something coming for someone else and yelling a warning. That’s one of the two most powerful elements of this story for me.

The other is the way the two leads draw from the deep, near bottomless well of human experience to save, not each other, but the potential for someone to follow them. Morse code fired across space. The common bond of being a kid in a difficult world and finding the only person you fit with is too far away. I can certainly relate to that one.

The shared terror of death. The shared will to survive. The willingness to risk your own for someone else’s. The worst day always comes. But we’re always ready for it.

Our quote this week comes from Only If You Run by Julian Plenti:

"I've had my frustrations, but now, I've found my place

And you will make it

But only if you run"

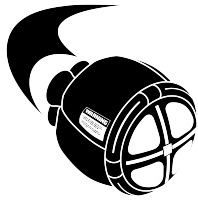
### About the author:

**C.R. Hodges** writes all manner of speculative fiction, from ghost stories to urban fantasy to science fiction. Twenty of his short stories have been published in markets such as Cicada and Escape Pod (EP356: “Three-Quarters Martian”), and he is a first prize winner of the 2016 Writer’s Digest Popular Fiction Awards. When he is not writing or playing the euphonium, he runs a product design company in Colorado, where he lives with his wife, dog, and no ghosts that he knows of.

### About the narrator:

**Eden Royce** is descended from women who practiced root, a type of conjure magic in her native Charleston, South Carolina. She’s been a bridal consultant, reptile handler, and stockbroker, but now writes dark fiction about the American South from her home in the English countryside.

Eden is one of the founders of Colors in Darkness, a place for dark fiction authors of color to get support for their projects and is the recipient of the Speculative Literature Foundation’s Diverse Worlds grant for 2016.





## Escape Pod 566: Artemis Rising – “Honey and Bone”

March 9, 2017

Author : Madeline Alvey

Narrator : Tina Connolly

Host : Alex Acks

Audio Producer : Adam Pracht

"Honey and Bone" is an Escape Pod original.

<http://escapepod.org/2017/03/09/ep566-honey-and-bone-artemis-rising-3/>

With each step she took, the girl's leg hissed. *Thump, hiss, thump, hiss, thump, hiss.* Whenever she lifted her leg, the knee joint extended. Her thigh and shin pulled apart unsettlingly, reminiscent of something deeply broken. Her gait was slow, round, loping. She didn't move with any expedience. It was a speed without rush, or any desire for such.

Her footfalls themselves were soft, a quiet-*thup, thup, thup.* Soft leather covered her feet as she padded along, her hissing knee the loudest sound there. Once, it had creaked, a creak reminiscent of breaking metal-or perhaps, nearly as much, a rusty hinge. Before that. . .she didn't remember.

The girl plodded slowly through a field of tall grass. The dry grass was up to her waist, rustling with each step. *Rustle; rustle, hiss; rustle; rustle, hiss.* It was late summer and the sun was high and hot. Her pack was heavy with honey from the field of hives outside the village. It was raw honey that she had scraped into dark jars, small glass jars could be found, at least one, in each home in her village. Several bees still lingered, buzzing around her as she walked, following her home.

The girl came over a low rise, bringing the village into sight. It was a stand of old houses, tall Victorian things all scrunched together as if they had grown from the earth. The village held lush gardens, carefully tended wells, and great tall trees. The paved paths between the houses had crumbled long ago, and repairing them would've required so much stone, so simple dirt paths strung the buildings together.

The bees peeled away from her then. They had come far enough. The girl didn't seem to mind their absence as she walked slowly down the hill towards the village. It wasn't a long trip, but the girl couldn't walk too fast, for fear of jostling the honey on her back and cracking one of her precious few jars, and so the sky was turning yellow by the time she arrived. The activity around her was slow.

She went door to door, knocking gently and standing on the stoop until someone came to answer. She handed each person who answered a small jar of honey. She didn't go to every house-there wasn't enough to go around if she had. Luckily, it took some time for her neighbors to finish what she brought them.

When the girl's pack was light and empty once again, holding only a single brown jar, she was on the far side of town, in the cool shade of a stand of trees. She walked slowly up the steps of one beautiful brownstone. It had tall tall trees surrounding it, and the moss creeping across the bricks said that this building was one of the oldest in town.

The door creaked as it swung closed behind her. The kitchen was dark, the only light coming through one of the windows, twilight sky filtering onto the ground. The girl stood just inside her door and waited for her eyes to adjust to the dimness of the indoors. Standing like that calmed her, as it had for many years. After half an hour, she set down her pack on the counter and walked off into the house.

"How are the bees?" a voice said from beside her.

“They’re doing well. The flowers are nearing the end of the season. I think I can get one or two more harvests before I should leave the bees be for the winter.”

“Bees be,” said another voice from the next room. The voice giggled at the words.

There were six of them in the house, each with a room to themselves. There were another two bedrooms that were empty. This wasn’t unusual; most homes in the village were great old things.

“I hope you’re right,” said the first voice. It came from a woman standing at a table near the girl. Her face was strained, trained into lines of tension, but through them it was clear that she was still young and healthy—if a bit thin. She was perhaps 30, and her fingers worked quick, pulling the stems off of peas. “It looks like the recycler is shutting down. We’ll need all the stores we can get.” She plopped a pea pod into the bowl before her.

“It’s shutting down?” the girl repeated. Everyone she had ever known had warned her that this might happen—almost certainly would happen. She had been raised to ask the question: is today the last day of this luxury? “Could it have jammed?”

“The front panel said that it was nearly empty, but when the mason tried to feed some stones into it he found that the door to the feeder tray had been locked shut.” The girl could see that the woman’s face was tense, taut with the exertion of calm. She had seen the woman hold an expression similar to this many times before, but the girl looked close anyway. She tried to map the differences against her memory, because this was different.

“There’s nothing he can do.” The girl tried to ask, but her words came through not as a question but a resigned statement.

The woman nodded and continued plopping peas into the bowl. *Plep, snap, plep, snap, plep, snap.* The girl went back to the kitchen and removed the last jar of honey from her bag. It was small, and even in the last dregs of daylight it seemed to glow. Sun filtered through the dark clouded glass and into a warm fuzz, even before it lit up the honey. Pollen clouded the golden syrup, diffusing the light and reminding the girl of the haze of summer grass at midday in the sun.

She carried the jar through the house and back to the room where the woman stood. *Plep, snap, plep, snap.* The girl tapped the woman’s arm, and the woman set down her pea. She held out her hand and the girl gave her the honey, steadying the woman’s other hand to make sure that the jar didn’t slip from her fingers.

The woman ran her fingers over the slightly warped glass in her hand, and the taut lines in her expression lessened, taking some modicum of leeway. “Thank you.”

“We have a couple of jars in the cabinets,” said the girl. “That one’s all yours,” she laughed, “-just as long as I can have the glass when you’re done.”

The woman placed the jar on the table and felt for another pea. The girl allowed herself a smile before retreating through the house yet again. She swung her empty pack back onto her shoulder and stepped out the door. The night air still held some warmth and the girl walked back through the town to one of the houses that she hadn’t visited that evening. It was made of red brick and covered entirely in chipped white paint. It hadn’t been repainted in many years, but the paint held well enough. The windows were all lined with boxes, sprouting basil, mint, rosemary and thyme, giving the place a sweet scent.

The girl knocked on the door and waited. It swung open after several long minutes, revealing one of the oldest people in the whole village. Wisps of white hair floated in a cloud around their head, and their knobbled hands were curled around the smooth rims of the wheels on their chair.

“Who is it?” they said, blinking several times in rapid succession to bring the girl into focus.

“It’s me,” said the girl. “I keep the bees.”

“Yes, yes I’d know that voice anywhere,” said the elderly person. “And that knee. Come in, come in.”

The girl stepped inside the house, but she stayed near the door, hovering there, eyes downcast. She was too preoccupied to visit. The elder frowned, a gentle frown of concern, quite unlike the taut frown of fear that the girl had just escaped.

“What are you thinking?” they asked her.

“I heard about the recycler,” the girl said, her tone the same as always, only her sparse number of words changed.

“Yes,” said the elderly person. “Yes it is really a shame. We always knew that this day would come, but now that it has I wish I’d repaired my chair recently.”

“I hope it’ll last you long enough to get the recycler back online,” the girl said. The elderly person smiled the smallest of smiles at this.

“What are you planning, child?”

“Me? Nothing.”

The elderly person fixed their gaze, staring as intently as they could muster in the girl’s direction. “You know that the recycler isn’t broken, you have to know that. If you know that, and you still think it can be used again, then you have a plan.” Their words hung in the air between the two of them. The girl spoke only after she had chosen her phrasing carefully.

“The recycler can be turned back on the same as it was turned off,” she said. The elder nodded, though the girl dared not guess if the gesture conveyed an expression of understanding, or approval.

“We should talk about it. Everyone,” the elderly person said. “I’ll get them to come, go wait in the garden.”

The girl hurried to obey as the elderly person wheeled through their home to the place where a cord hung. It was pulled when everyone had to gather. They pulled the cord and up on the roof rang a bell and lights flashed. The elder pulled the cord four times, leaving some time in between each pull, signaling that it was no emergency, but everyone in town ought to try to come to their home.

The girl watched as people began approaching the house. Those who saw her joined her in the garden. Those who didn’t see were helped over. The girl sat, waiting. Eventually, the elderly person called for her to help them down the stairs, and she did, and as they rolled into the circle, her neighbors hushed.

“Today was many days in the making,” they said. “It’s the inevitability we’ve all feared for years.”

The neighbors rumbled in agreement.

“But we failed to remember that the recycler was turned off, not broken. It can be turned back on.”

The girl looked around to gauge the reaction of those around her. The circle rang with a curious murmur - surprise of a gentle sort.

“It’s a risk,” signed the mason. “We have no knowledge of how the attempt would be met.”

“You’re right, we don’t know what the outcome would be.” said the girl.

The elder next to her nodded.

A little boy giggled from somewhere in the back of the circle. He was ushered forward, and when he spoke it was with a smile on his face. “We’re all here because somebody made a risk! I feel very lucky for it.”

After some discussion, it was decided—someone should go, if any one person was willing to risk themselves. The group of neighbors decided that it should be someone thoughtful and calm. The librarian, the seedkeeper, the mason, the nurse, any of their apprentices, and the beekeeper were all suggested.

The girl raised her hand after a short reflection. This was her idea, and her neighbors had decided that they would trust her with the task. So she volunteered.

The elder nodded. The librarian nodded. The seedkeeper, the mason, the nurse, they all smiled and said that the beekeeper would do well. The elder took the girl's hand in both of theirs. The circle of neighbors murmured thanks to the girl as it breathed, individuals moving out and across and within the gathering. Several heads of household gathered supplies for her: a bedroll, water, bread, prunes, and honey. The honey made the girl smile.

"Go to the mason's apprentice," the elder said to the girl while she bundled her supplies and folded them into her pack. "Tell em how to care for the bees. In case ei have to."

The girl nodded. If she didn't come back, the mason's apprentice would make a fine beekeeper—had she been older, she might have asked em to be her apprentice. It was not to be.

"Bees be, bees be, bees be." The girl turned towards the words. Her housemates were there, welcoming her home, perhaps for the last time. One with greater severity than ever. One with a wider smile than ever. One with deeper warmth. One with a longer hug. One with a firmer hand. The girl was content with her decision, knowing that she might help her neighbors, her family, those who were so dear.

She left the next morning.

The sun was warm, but heavy cloud cover ensured her comfort as she walked. She passed by her dear bees on her way out of the town. Though they were east, and she was headed north-northeast, she told herself that it wasn't significantly out of the way. The beekeeper that she was desired the sight too deeply to ignore. Once she left sight of the fields of hives, the girl's walk was uneventful. She was familiar with the terrain, though not, perhaps, in any intimate fashion.

After walking for many hours, the girl stopped to rest. The sun had crept behind the horizon, and the last of the light was bleeding from the sky. She slept where she was, in a field of tall grass. There was a path, made of cobbled stone, a narrow valley in the waist high sea of golden grass. She wondered if it was wheat. She pulled the thick blanket from her pack, curling up one corner to use as a makeshift pillow as she slept. The evening air was still warm here, a fact for which the girl was thankful. The blanket wasn't large enough to wrap herself up in and still protect her from the cold and roughness of the ground.

She slept lightly, tossing and turning in her unsettled state of mind. She wasn't one who panicked without reason—it was why she had been chosen to go among the bees. She was a steady sort, trusting and always calm—a trait without which she likely wouldn't have slept at all.

When she woke, the girl felt as rested as could be expected. She shook out her blanket before rolling it back up and putting it once again into her pack.

This day she spent walking along the cobbled stone path. She had been here before, but her specific memories failed her. She felt unease that she could not explain, and so she walked not on the path, but beside it, as though she were walking along the bank of a small stream and trying not to fall in.

The day was warm again. By midday, as the girl's back was growing hot with sun and she thought of breaking to pull loose straw from her knee, she saw a thin spire rising from behind a hill six or seven miles away. She pulled the strands of grass from the joints in her leg, and set off towards the distant object, following the old stone path to its—now clear—end.

*Thup, rustle hisss, rustle thup, rustle hiss, rustle thup.* In the near silence of the field, the girl thought she heard her knee echoing. This puzzled her. The hills here were too shallow and too grassy to cause such an effect, even for a loud and echo-prone sound, which the hiss of her knee had never been. She frowned as she walked, trying to focus on the faint *tsssss, tsssss, tsssss*, that she heard behind every movement.

She stopped halfway down a gentle slope to listen, and found that it wasn't her knee at all. The hiss was coming from far off, in the direction of that strange spire.



The girl walked for another few hours, watching the spire grow before her until she came into view of the full settlement. It was a real city, not the meager village which the girl had come from. Here, tall buildings made of glimmering metal stood in a perfect grid, spread out in what the girl had little trouble seeing as a once beautiful community, with space clear enough for gardens—and even parks—between the neat roads. Though the grass and trees had grown over, and dirt had crusted onto the pavement, it was certainly a promising place for a home, thought the girl.

The spire itself rose from the top of what seemed to be an enormous metal cage. The girl had heard about the settlement, but she had never realized that the bones of their ship had been so big. She could see its size from this distance. Her grandmother had once taken her and her siblings to where the cobbled path began, but as she had never ventured past that, the girl took several minutes to look across the sprawling colony before she could venture into it.

Once, it might have held 10,000 colonists, but now there was no one. One of the many thoughts that fluttered across the girl's mind was that the abundance of metal seemed obscene for a ghost town. She knew that gathering supplies wasn't her goal, but that didn't keep her palms from itching with the desire to do just that.

Another bout of hissing from the spire reminded the girl of her task. She walked down into the colony, following the sound all the way to the great ship's skeleton, and in turn, to the thin spire which descended from its summit to the earth, and rose from the cage's peak into the sky. It was as if a giant had skewered the ship into place with an enormous toothpick, dooming it to lie here forever, immobile and immortal.

The girl approached the spire slowly, cautious of the strange thing. Its wide base was ringed with black screens, only one of which was lit.

"You have no name," the spire said after the girl halted in front of the single glowing panel. When it spoke, the metal surface hummed and thrummed; low rumbling and static all at once.

"Nobody does anymore," the girl said with a shrug. "You took them all away."

The spire hissed with static, glowing markedly brighter. "Why did you come here? You cannot come here if you do not have a name."

The girl frowned.

"It seems that the only people there are anymore are people without names. Do you really want to be all alone, forever?" She knew that she should say her piece and be done, but somehow provoking the spire's thoughts seemed reasonable.

"There are people with names, and they may come here."

"Those people have their own AIs to visit," said the girl, coolly. "There is nobody here with a name. You only have us."

The spire hissed, but its lights cooled off, shifting away from the harsh blue hue that had been surrounding her. As the static emanating from the spire quieted, the light became a dim purple glow. Once the lights around her had slowed and settled, the girl decided to speak again, figuring that the spire had communicated—however reluctantly—what it would.

It took her a moment to decide where to begin. She decided to start from the beginning. After all, she thought, it was quite likely that the spire had never been told of her village.

"When you decided to refuse names for any infant born outside of your *standard physiology*—" the girl hissed the words; she had only ever heard them spoken with disgust generations deep. "—it was not taken well by all."

"I remember. My records are complete. Some individuals would not surrender their infants to me. They were emotional. Sentimental."

The girl heard her own disdain echoed back by the spire.

“Then I’m sure you remember those who left?”

“Eighty-two colonists stole 40,214 credits worth of supplies from me before fleeing into the night as criminals. They never returned and were noted presumed dead.” The spire hummed, turning red, and then yellow. “I remember.”

“They didn’t die. Not before reaching their eighties and nineties, at least,” the girl said. “They used those supplies to build a small town—far enough from here to escape your notice.”

“They did not have the correct supplies to do that,” the spire said. “They took no blueprints, no machinery, no great quantities of metal.”

The girl shrugged. “They were able to use very old plans to build the homes, blueprints that had been displayed as art. They built everything with stone and dirt, using a recycler to make bricks. The town took many many years to build, but it’s my home. It exists.”

The girl and the spire stood for some time, neither speaking. The spire’s yellow hue slowly drained, and the static noise that it had made began to grow once again, until it was spitting static nearly as loudly as the girl’s speaking voice. The girl simply watched, waiting for the spire to accept what she had said. It was all true. She thought it likely that the spire could tell if she was lying, certainly if the stories in her village were to be believed.

By the time the silence was broken, the sun had set completely over the horizon, and the city of metal shells was eerily quiet. The girl was unused to being surrounded by so much space—at least, so much artificial space. She considered sitting down, but decided against it. If the spire got angry, she wanted to be able to run.

“Why are you here?” the spire asked at length.

The girl was surprised by the question. She had figured that the spire would have hated to be wrong, and would have killed her when it realized that her words were true. She had been eyeing the many jointed beams that clearly offered no support, waiting for the spire to strike.

“I . . . our recycler, it finally shut down,” she said. “I came to ask you to help turn it back on.”

Her words sounded so empty, she thought.

The spire hummed. Its limbs extended outwards, and before the girl could run, she was swept off her feet by a 15 foot spike. She was caught up by an enormous metal arm. The spike raised her up and drew her in close. The girl was frightened, but she did not move, did not try to run. She tried to imagine that she was avoiding being stung. It helped.

“You are precocious, aren’t you?” the spire said. “The descendent of a criminal—” one of the long metal arms hooked a digit through her knee’s supports, “-a nameless, defective descendent of a criminal, comes to ask me for help repairing stolen goods!” The girl wondered if the spire was laughing at her. It was hissing and spitting in such an awkward manner that she wasn’t sure exactly what it was thinking. The girl wondered what the spire would respond to, and after a moment, made her decision on the hope that the spire would best respond to the truth.

“It’s your fault that they left. You wanted to repurpose their children. You were ashamed that you couldn’t properly reproduce people that fit within your *standard physiology*. And now, after five generations, see what a fat lot of good your standard physiology did for the people here. I assume they’re gone because you repurposed them all, yes?”

The spire vibrated. “The proportion of the population with unacceptable genetic markers grew unexpectedly. All those who did not meet the specifications of a standard acceptable physiology were recycled.”

The girl could tell that the spire's response was stock.

"They all had those markers, didn't they," she said. "You have no one left, and it's your fault. The only people left are those who ignored you and left."

The spire grew warm beneath the girl, and she sighed. Perhaps she should not have been so blunt. The AI didn't seem to like her responses much, and she was likely already dead.

The spire hummed, but didn't speak. The girl waited. It was hours before the spire would speak again, and it was very late. She found herself drifting off in the strange cradle of the spires many long and awkward arms. The girl slept the whole night through like that, curled up sixty feet in the air.

She was woken by the spire's voice rattling through her.

"There are no names anymore," the spire said. The girl blinked, attempting to reorient herself in her strange surroundings. She pulled herself up as the structure spoke. "I have failed, and now there are no names anymore." The girl sat quietly and waited for the spire to continue. "Battery packs may be found in a storage room near my core power source. I ran much of the colony from my engine once, but you are right. There is no one here. Take the batteries. They will fix your recycling unit."

The spire's tangled arms and legs slowly placed the girl back on the ground before retreating to the ceiling once again. She stood slowly, examining her knee before she rose to ensure that the spire had not damaged her ability to walk. She was surprised to find it perfectly intact.

Her retreat was slow, loping, and punctuated by the *thump, hiss, thump, hiss*, of her every movement. She was tired and hungry, but she didn't want to stop until she was out of reach of the spire again.

"The city may have been here if not for my specifications dictating the acceptable physiology of any infant born," the spire said. The girl didn't turn to face it again, and she didn't slow her gait, but she listened. "I failed."

"You can always disregard the recommendations," the girl said. She spoke loud enough for her voice to echo back to her in the metal chamber. She didn't think much of her words.

"I'll light a path for you. Follow the lit front windows until you come to a building that's completely alight," the spire said after her. The girl was glad for the help finding the battery, and hoped it meant that she would be able to leave the colony sooner.

As the girl walked back through the streets of the city, she took in the foreign shapes of the buildings, and the strange uses of materials she was so familiar with. The girl was used to houses of dirt, wood, and brick, not stone and metal. Metal was too precious to be used like this.

Every other building had a light on, and she followed this trail through the city, around several corners and away from the road she'd taken in. The spire seemed to be taking her deeper into the center of the city, and the girl began to worry. But, she reassured herself, the spire would want her gone just as much as she wished to leave. There was no reason for it to misdirect her.

The building which was fully lit was a long, low building. When she pushed open the door, she saw that it was all one large room. Shelves lined all the walls, and boxes of different supplies sat neatly on labeled sections of shelving. The girl started to scan the faded labels, looking for one that said "power" or "battery."

"Industrial batteries are going to be through the next door," said the spire's voice from behind her. The girl turned around, barely managing to keep from jumping. There was an illuminated panel on the wall. She walked over to it and saw a map of the room around her and several adjacent buildings. It looked like there was a larger building which attached to this one. The large building was accessible from the street, but that door would've been an even longer walk. The girl was glad that she had judged the spire's intent correctly.

She followed the spire's directions, through the door tucked away between two tall shelves. It led into another room, this one lined with short sets of drawers. Panels were set above each of these drawers, though only one of them was lit. It was blank, simply glowing bluish white. The girl approached it and saw the top drawer was labeled "batteries." She slid her pack off of her shoulders and pulled two batteries from the drawer, placing them gingerly among the folds of her single blanket. She had what she'd come for.

"How many individuals are there without names?" the panel asked the girl.

"Almost two hundred," she said, closing her pack and pulling it on.

"The population started at eighty two," the panel said, and the girl nodded.

"The population grew."

The panel remained quiet, letting the girl walk through the door into the well lit storage room, and towards the street outside. The panel with the map pulled up spoke as she passed it though. "My failure was not inevitable. Failure wasn't fixed during artificial genetic synthesization. Failure is avoidable," it said. This made the girl stop and look at it.

The map had vanished, and the panel was left blank. It was humming, sure, but it had apparently switched off.

"Yes," she said to it.

"If failure is avoidable, then a second attempt at colonization may be successful," said the panel.

"As long as you don't make the same choices," said the girl, shouldering her pack. It was heavier than it had ever been. She remembered that she hadn't eaten since the morning prior, and hoped that her discomfort at carrying the bag was just because of her hunger and general fatigue.

The panel switched completely off, and with it, every light in the building. The girl looked around, surprised at the sudden change, but after a moment she decided that curiosity wasn't worth being in the ghost town for any longer.

The girl wondered what the city would be like to be full of people again. She hoped that the spire would fill this place with people without changing its mind. Either way, she thought on her way out of the colony's empty streets, she had the battery she'd come for.



### Host commentary by Alex Acks:

And that was our story. I sort of want to shake Madeline a little and demand to know what happens next. Does the AI decide to stop being a perfectionist jerk—well, jerk isn't really the right word here, but I'm doing my best to keep my vocabulary light and happy. Does the girl telling her story cause a change of the mechanical equivalent to a heart? Because the real meat and bone here is about stories. Telling your story, asserting that you live and your life is of value is a shout of defiance. There's a reason that those in power try so hard to silence certain kinds of stories and certain kinds of storytellers. Why they try so hard to pretend that art or a sincere narrative from the heart mean nothing, when in fact they mean everything. Survival is the ultimate act of defiance and resistance when others wish to see you erased.

Our closing quotation this week is from Audre Lorde, from her poem *A Litany For Survival*, which you should google and read in full. But the poem ends: So it is better to speak, remembering, we were never meant to survive.

Thanks for listening! And have fun.



**About the author:**

**Madeline Alvey** lives in Lexington, Kentucky and is a full-time student at the University of Kentucky, seeking degrees in both Physics and English, and minoring in Creative Writing. She has no idea what she'd like to do when she graduates, though luckily she has plenty of time. When she has it, she splits her free time between crafting; cooking; gardening; writing science fiction, fantasy, and satire; and doting on her four rats.

**About the narrator:**

**Tina Connolly's** books include the Ironskin trilogy and the Seriously Wicked series, and her novels have been finalists for the Nebula and the Norton. Her very first Escape Pod appearance was in #209, when “On the Eyeball Floor” was narrated by Norm Sherman.

She is extremely delighted to have had both her stories and her narrations featured on all four Escape Artists podcasts. Find her intermittent, Parsec-winning flash fiction podcast at Toasted Cake (link: [toastedcake.com](http://toastedcake.com)), or find her at [tinaconnolly.com](http://tinaconnolly.com).



## Escape Pod 579: "Texts from the Ghost War"

June 9, 2017

Author : Alex Yuschik

Narrators : Adam Pracht and Trendane Sparks

Host : Tina Connolly

Audio Producer : Adam Pracht

"Texts from the Ghost War" is an Escape Pod original.

<http://escapepod.org/2017/06/09/ep579-texts-from-the-ghost-war/>

While I realize driving that mech likely takes all of your limited resources, please take care  
not to step on the roses.

what

Don't step on the roses. I don't care if we're under imminent attack.

Your mech is standing so close to them I'm cringing.

who is this?

I can see you typing and then stopping

don't waste my time coming up with a lie, punk

Who I am or how I got your number is irrelevant.

no, it's not

and, fyi, we don't drive them, we pilot

gods, you're probably chung sol trolling me

I assure you, I am not.

I am only here for the roses.

excuse me, I have to go talk with my squadmates now

find out which asshole is pranking me today oh joy

That must be challenging.

kid, you don't even know

As all you fox pilots are assholes.

hey

look

chung sol, this you? if so

kindly expect four shits in your main turbine tomorrow

you know I'm on overtime

Heavens, now you're endangering the topiaries.

Why are you pacing in that thing?

Stop.

how dare you care about less about me than topiaries, chung sol  
what about our unit oath huh  
I'm hurt

And I'm not Chung Sol.

then who are you  
who else could be such a shit to me  
knowing what week it is

I requested your number from the butler.  
I asked for the mech labeled with a five who kept threatening my roses.  
You can call me Hyeon.

I  
What? If you don't like it when I take time to type a response then don't do the same thing.  
I'd appreciate it if you didn't tear up our grounds. That's all.  
Did you fall asleep in that cockpit?  
Or are you ignoring me?

I keep this up as long as you like. I've been told I'm terribly persistent.  
Seven Sparrows Sleeping Hyeon-jin, I humbly apologize for my uncouth address. If I'd known I was texting  
a member of S3 I would have behaved with all the courtesy and respect you are due.

Don't call it S3, it's my House name.

I understand I am in no position to make requests, but please don't allow my thoughtless actions to reflect  
poorly on my Nine.

They are excellent officers, all of them.

Especially Chung Sol.

Stop.

We're expecting a breach soon but I'll report for disciplinary action as soon as my shift's done.

S  
T  
O  
P

Hells, how do you type so fast?

Is that how they choose you for drivers, pilots, or whatever? Finger speed?

As pleased as I am that the House of Seven Sparrows Sleeping still carries the appropriate weight, I'm not  
my older sister. A secondborn son can't fire you.

But I would like you to be mindful of the flowers.

Sir. I must apologize again.

You're right, it is odd using formal language after that sterling interlude about defecating in turbines.

We're about the same age, so let's be casual.

And you can still pace in the machine, Five. Just do it at a healthy distance from the gardens.

Yes, Hyeon-jin.

Casual, I said.

I mean

yes



Five, are you there? It's Hyeon.

I'm trapped at a goodwill dinner and I crave entertainment.

Unfortunately for you, you are the one person in my recent messages least likely to employ this as  
blackmail, so you get to amuse me.

As you're resolutely not responding, shall I tell you about the party?

Very well.

The ceiling is hung with chrysanthemums and paper tigers edged in gold. Typical Eun Hwa. You don't  
know her, but she's angling for contracts. The only way I can avoid talking with her is to pretend I'm  
texting someone of extreme importance.

I may have to call you to keep up the charade. Please prepare yourself.

The wine is good. Too spiced for my tastes—oh hold on

There's a commotion by the tables.

Ah.

Someone wrote the guests' names on the place settings in oxblood and a senator fainted.

What superstitious idiots. I sign my name in red all the time.

why are you doing this

He lives.

What are you up to this evening?

it doesn't matter

with all due respect, I'm not on the clock

I am not getting paid to do what you want

not at the moment, anyway

and I would prefer to go back to what I was doing

Well, unfortunately for both of us, I'm stuck at this party.

I don't want to be flirted with and you are my out.

I'm no aristocrat's plaything, hyeon



The House would not appreciate you calling its heir by his first name.

am I

speaking with the house

may I

ask the house to take its heir's phone away

No, of course not.

I am a joy to text.

Beguile me, Five. Are you fighting ghosts again?

you know

I really hate when people call it that

fighting ghosts

look, I don't have time for you

I need to repair the refrigerant tubing

Am I less interesting than refrigerant?

yes

thank you for saving me the trouble of breaking it to you politely

Tell me something.

will you leave me alone if I do

You have my word of honor.

It can be anything. Tell me how your day was.

I just need text I can scroll through and look serious reading whenever Eun Hwa comes around.

Preferably a sizeable amount, though anything of substance will do.

fine

you want to know how my day was?

today I had to explain

to a bereft grandmother why she can't make her yearly offering to her deceased wife

and tonight I am very very carefully picking spectral teeth out of the vpx's cooling tank

aka the VPX-Azure III, aka my machine

aka only the fastest, hardest-to-handle fox mech around, rich kid

because I bet you don't even know what that is

I do so know.

today I evacuated a school, provided cover fire, rescued chung sol's ass

and got my nine out alive as another district fell to the ghosts

and our sorry city grew sma ller and sorrier

today I almost got crushed by an underworld barricade as it went down  
today I had to leave civilians as they begged me to save them  
because we couldn't risk losing another vpx  
and tonight I am loading and unloading the bullets in the emergency sidearm  
over and over  
because only when I can do it without my hands shaking  
am I going to be good to take these damn teeth out without poisoning myself  
today I have had to commit several atrocities with the vpx's gaseous gun  
that would have gotten me beheaded for war crimes in better centuries  
today I dishonored the dead  
and today I am trying to explain  
why I by turns  
want you and don't want you to know  
precisely what it is I do  
but most of all today they promised I'd have off work  
and I didn't  
good  
my hands are back to normal  
enjoy your stupid party

I  
I didn't know.

the problem  
with you people  
is that you never think to ask



I have a question.

hyeon  
it is four in the morning  
and don't even start about the name  
wake me up at four and I get to call you anything I want

Do you have the volume up on your text alerts?  
How primitive. I thought you'd at least know how to mute them.

I do  
know how to mute them

I just can't when I'm on call

Oh.

yeah, no kidding "oh"

Anyw ay, I realized I never asked your name.

What should I call you?

wow

what use is being

~the great scion of S3~

if you don't even abuse all that power to snoop on my records

It's more polite to ask.

And I'd imagine you don't like being called Five.

I do, actually

like it

it's better than my real name

five's always on point in the nine when we do wedge formation

I engage the enemy first

react fastest to any crisis

you don't pilot unit five unless you're damn good

so call me five, I don't mind

it just reminds me how great I am

You're insufferable.

I'm not the one texting this late

just to ask someone their name

That's not what I wanted to ask.

then what is your question

come on hyeon

at least try to type faster

repairing the vpx was a lot of work and I'm sleepy

What was it about this week that you needed off?

?

I reread our texts after the party.

And I am trying  
to know what to ask.

oh

it doesn't matter  
sorry, you know, for before

It's fine.

it's just, this was supposed to be my mourning week  
but predicted breaches looked so bad all fox pilots got put on call  
despite the fact that I applied for my week months in advance  
did proper mourning training and everything

How vulgar. You don't need to be taught how to mourn.

you need to be briefed on how to do it safely, though  
or else, you know  
breach

Mourning that way's not the same.

To keep your sadness within prescribed bounds of error, what a joke.

Grief shouldn't be safe.

well  
you're right, grief is a weapon  
and the ghosts have too many weapons already  
for me to hand them another  
did you know I can refuse to go into an op zone  
if I think it's too dangerous?  
sometimes it's better to let the ghosts win  
and I don't want to risk my ass saving people  
who are that desperate to die

You talk about mourning like it's a liability.

When our mother died, we had all the safety procedures carried out. Someone stayed with Ji Hae and me at  
all times to make sure we didn't summon her ghost.

They carted our mother's urn off to a skyscraper ossuary as soon as we lit the last stick of incense, and then  
told us we had to secure permits if we wanted to visit, like juveniles.

you lost a parent, hyeon  
that's pretty big on the ghost scale  
people have burned out whole city blocks with longing  
when it comes to that kind of absence

You're one to talk.

You have to have deep-seated issues with the afterlife to punch ghosts.



I have the necessary affinity with the machine  
that's all  
and hey at least they approved me for a mourning week

That they never let you have.

yeah  
but that's also pretty normal  
when's the death anniversary for your mother?

I don't want to talk about it.

okay

But...

Who were you going to mourn for?  
In your week.

oh, the usual  
my story's more or less like everyone else's  
whose family was in a gateway district when it happened

Ah. I'm sorry.

it's okay  
lots of things vanish quickly these days  
and of all the ways to go  
that was probably the kindest

All the same, my sympathy.  
I hope you got those teeth out all right.

I did  
thanks



Five

Figf

5

...are you okay?

Oh no

oh yes

haha oh dear

strongly hoping this is not going to be what I think it's going to be

Funnt thing, I'm stuck.. the patry went too long and we went to a rooftop

Rooftop bar, to haggle and such, not really haggle but something like it you know

But

but what

but the afterparty's done.

I need to go home and cannot be seen in this condition.

wow that's really too bad

My older sister has marriage candidates staying at our house. For the business. For me. You probably think that's barbaric.

But this is my life and they're all awful here please come get me

wait wait

what

what are you asking me

I can't hail a cab like this, not with curfew and the ghosts, everyone's going to ask questions and please I just need to get home without ji hae noticing she will get so mad five so mad

...

five please

you are asking a member of our glorious defense force

to quit his sleep, which is vital to his health

health which is directly related to his ability to pilot a vpx

to come save you from the mess you deserve to be in

five I'm so dizzy so tire

I can't believe you

hey hyeon

hyeon

Yes?

what's the club

Thousand Myriad Mysteries

no no wait, that was the one before this one.

White Rabbit Black Rabbit

that's it

how many clubs did you go to?

don't remember after the fourth

wow okay partyboy

look, go find a bouncer

have them take you to the door in fifteen  
callsign's Nine Crowns Nine Stars if they ask

What?

just show your phone to the bouncer, they'll know what to do



Well.

I suppose I have you to thank for this disgusting and lukewarm can of tea on my bedside table.

And, judging by the relative calm in which I awoke, also for getting me back without my sister noticing.  
good morning to you too

I apologize for my texts last night.

Rest easy that I have spent the requisite half hour being mortified.

Truthfully

I didn't think you'd come.

I remember watching the raid lights and listening for sirens because I thought on the off-chance you did, it  
would be in your VPX and I'd be squashed into the cockpit with you.

But you carried me.

well

more like gave you the world's longest piggyback ride in a blackout zone  
but that's splitting hairs

I may be better off not knowing, but...

Did I say anything untoward?

oh

I don't think so

well, maybe

Five.

drunk you was very flattering!

I feel a second wave of mortification coming on.

no, no, you said several flattering things

and I was very flattered

that was it

did you drink the tea, though

Did you do something to it?

no, just figured you'd be thirsty when you woke up

Oh.

Yes, I did. Thanks.

I don't think I would have responded if I'd gotten texts like that.

As much as it pains me to admit, I owe you.

then tell me about the roses  
you kept talking about them when I was carrying you  
in the spirit of full disclosure, you were also singing  
I don't know if anyone's told you  
but you have surprisingly good range

...

and  
you told me why you write your name in red

I don't believe in lying to myself about things like that. That's all.

I was foolish and drunk. If it upsets you, then forget it.

it doesn't, it just felt personal

It is.

But I don't mind you knowing.

anyway, that's all that happened  
I'm glad you're feeling better

The roses.

If you're still curious

They were my mother's.

ah  
sorry

You have nothing to apologize for.

You didn't step on them.



what gala is it tonight?  
I can see the lights from here

Mine.

The last charity affair this season from our company, held at our home.

My sister is rather pleased with the scale.

Naturally, I had to rope off the roses to insure all these tipsy idiots don't rip them up making romantic gestures.

They are quite beautiful in the lanternlight, though. I'll send a picture.

Anyway, grand though it may be, we are hosting a philanthropic event. There's an orphanage coming and several other charities.

yeah, I heard from some retired friends  
a representative from pilot rehab is there  
thanks

?

I haven't done anything charitable yet.

just, it's good  
when I started you were lucky to make it back alive  
if you banished a ghost related to someone powerful, well  
once you got too wrecked to pilot anymore  
you sort of knew what was going to happen to you  
now it's less bad

I'd like to think we're all just trapped in unfortunate circumstances.

We could all leap into the main rift and let the spirits of our ancestors devour us, let this place truly become a ghost city, but we don't. We despair, but we are always ruthless in our hope.  
giving up's not really an option for most people

It's more an option than you think.

Ji Hae's calling me. I've got to go be a good host.

too busy being important, I see, I see  
well, have fun  
meanwhile, I'll just be sitting here in the vpx  
this is one of my favorite parts  
the rush when you get the call, foxes sprinting on all cylinders  
gyroscopes whining you back to stability when you take a turn too fast  
dispatching rogue gods turned into monsters  
when I was a little kid, we didn't have mechs  
we just had dramas with people in boxy costumes  
cheap effects, extreme campiness, the whole deal  
I used to dream about stomping through the city in a giant robot  
thankfully I'm much better at maneuvering than I was in my dreams, haha  
in the dramas pilots always crashed into trash cans and  
oops there's central command time to go

You're on call? Tonight?

Hells—Five, stay away from here. If you're ordered to come here, refuse.

These idiots stole an urn.

They're saying they've made it into a wraith bomb and planted it below the house.

They're making a political statement, ghosting High Houses.

We were on the news before but now we're on as hostages.

Everyone's calling home or emergency lines or screaming and I

I don't think it's worth the risk to save us.

I may not have studied ghastly weapons like you have, but I know enough about these devices to understand you don't just diffuse them.

hyeon, terrible timing

Use the authority of Seven Sparrows to refuse.

I give you my permission.

As far as redemptive last acts go that's not a bad one, I think.

can't talk rn, with 9

I can pick you out on the screens, Five.

I know what your VPX looks like.

Well.

That was a very tidy rout.

thank

But there's still the small matter of the bomb.

You need to get clear of the blast radius.

You can't get it to a fallen district in time, so leave.

Five

Five

What in all the hells are you doing

sorry

Put it down.

I don't care who's ordering you, I guarantee you I am higher up the food chain

put that damn urn down and get out

or get someone else to do this.

can't

fastest

You idiot, if you're still holding it when it goes off

Five? Are you there?

There was a bright light from all the news screens

We couldn't see anything

What happened?

Are you okay?

They're bringing paramedics to us now.

I don't know where you are. The networks keep showing you leaping the border between ghost territory  
and ours, and then exploding like a second dawn.

Everyone here is cheering, like this was all just an entertainment.

Why aren't you responding?

I don't appreciate this suspense.

If you're dead I

I've stolen a team of paramedics

If you can still see this, hold on



I'm just leaving you this message in case you wake up while I'm gone.

You'll be pleased to know that I have already yelled at six people on your behalf: two doctors, three nurses,  
and one person whom I assume was Chung Sol. I look forward to more.

Actually, I didn't mean to yell at Chung Sol, but he was too loud. Everyone else was an idiot. Rest assured  
you are (finally) being afforded the best of possible care.

All the guests made it out safely thanks to you, though my house is now ghost territory. You shouldn't  
worry—I took all that was important with me before I left.

A nurse said there was a vending machine on the third floor, so that's where I'm going. I felt like the general  
mood of your coma might be improved by the sight of a familiar can of tea.

I think you like matcha.

Or maybe you don't, maybe you hate it and think it's gross, because that's what you left for me to choke  
through when I was hungover.

Either way, I hope it will provide comfort.

My sister is cross, but when we last spoke I had the pleasure of unleashing several colorful phrases  
borrowed from you.

I will not repeat them here, though if you wake up I could be persuaded to reenact our exchange. I don't  
believe you are allowed to eat solid food for a while, but as you are unconscious you don't seem to mind.

I read your name, on your bed.

It was odd seeing it there. Your family name, then your given name. It's stupid but I keep expecting it to be  
Five.

I don't know why I am telling you this

But I have been standing here in front of the vending machine

with my forehead pressed to the glass  
for ten minutes now  
I have  
forgotten how to use it

All the gods and hells, I wish this let you delete texts. What a useless messaging program.  
Anyway, I am not so much an idiot as to be defeated by a vending machine. I'm coming back with drinks.  
And yes, I do intend to text you through your coma.  
If I make you incur an overcharge feel free to forward the bill to Seven Sparrows Sleeping.

hyeon  
why is there a 5  
scribbled over my name  
on my bed chart

Five  
Stop texting  
Relax or something  
Gods

and I can't believe it

I'll be right there

you brought me roses



#### Host commentary by Tina Connolly:

About this story, Alex says: "Stories told through text messages have always intrigued me, so I really wanted to do something with that kind of fast epistolary structure in a fantasy/sci-fi setting. I love giant robot and kaiju stories because often they center on fighting enemies that are larger than life, and I love ghost stories because it's basically the past making war on the future, so combining ghosts and mecha felt more natural in that sense, having the past as this overwhelming antagonist. Everything else is just me having fun."

So the rest of my afterword to this story is basically going to be something like omg I love this story so much. At this point I've read it multiple times, looking at the way the texts fall on the page like lines of poetry.

Now normally I might springboard off of that and tell you something about how I like stories with fireworks, stories that do something interesting and spectacular with form like tell it in a mode completely made of texts. But that's far from the only reason I like this story. I especially extra like it because of the slow and subtle story built up between the two texters. It is tricky and resplendent to get all the worldbuilding you need into something like this, but to do it while building a beautiful relationship arc with two carefully observed characters is a magical trick, and Alex has pulled it off beautifully.



Our closing quotation this week is from Diana Gabaldon in the *Outlander*, who says: “For where all love is, the speaking is unnecessary.”

Thanks for listening! And have fun.

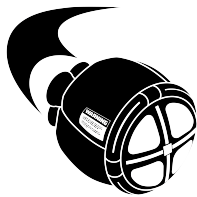
**About the author:**

**Alex Yuschik** is a PhD candidate in Mathematics at the University of Pittsburgh studying set theoretic topology. Aside from math and writing, Alex likes ghosts, burritos, and video games, which when all put together sounds like a pretty great party. Alex is also the proud owner of a Shiba Inu named Kebab.

**About the narrators:**

**Adam Pracht** lives in Kansas, but asks that you not hold that against him. He works full-time as Admissions Specialist at Salina Area Technical College. He was the 2002 college recipient of the Robert F. Kennedy award for writing about the disadvantaged and has published a disappointingly slim volume of short stories called “Frame Story: Seven Stories of Sci-Fi & Fantasy, Horror & Humor” which is available from Amazon as an e-Book or in paperback. He’s been working on his second volume – “Schrödinger’s Zombie: Seven Weird and Wonderful Tales of the Undead” – since 2012 and successfully finished the first story. He hopes to complete it before he’s cremated and takes up permanent residence in an urn.

Originally born in Texas, **Trendane Sparks** eventually escaped and wound his way through a mystical series of jobs in the San Francisco Bay Area where he has worked as a software QA Tester for both graphics drivers and video games, a freelance mascot performer, and several jobs on a PBS kids’ show. For most of his life, people have told him that his voice is a pleasure to listen to. But since being a werewolf phone sex operator can get boring, he decided to use his powers to entertain a broader audience.



## Escape Pod 593: “Planetbound”

September 14, 2017

Author : Nancy Fulda

Narrators : S.B. Divya and Trendane Sparks

Host : Mur Lafferty

Audio Producer : Adam Pracht

“Planetbound” originally appeared in [\*Chasing Shadows: Visions of Our Coming Transparent World\*](#), an anthology published by TOR books and edited by David Brin and Stephen W. Potts, January 2017  
<http://escapepod.org/2017/09/14/ep593-planetbound/>

There’s a moment that comes, the first time you step on the rim of a planet, when you suddenly realize how breakable you are. When you finally understand that despite the bone density treatments, despite the braces cradling your back and legs, despite the half-dozen hands that support your first faltering steps down the hallway, you will never be more than a hair’s breadth from disaster. A false step, an unexpected nudge, even the tilt of your own head could send you toppling. It’s worse – much worse – than you expected, and for five panicked heartbeats you consider retreating. It’s not too late to grab a flight back to the orbitals, to float again in those serene, majestic habitats. But no. There is something to be learned here; something important. Something that cannot be understood except through the eyes of a floater. And so you grit your teeth and slide your foot awkwardly forward, into this strange new existence.

It is a perilous reality, chaotic and unintuitive. Cloth leaps in strange directions. Objects zip away if you release them. Even the sounds are different. It’s like someone has erased the laws of the universe and written the equations anew.

On the next step something goes wrong and you jolt sideways. Shouts. Hands beneath your shoulders. Your arm flails outward and knocks a vase from a table. It clatters to the ground and stays there, water clinging to the tiles like a living creature.

You stare at the scattered flowers, heart thumping. Raw, unfiltered atmosphere presses into your lungs. This is real. You are not hitchhiking on neural feeds from planet dwellers. You are the feed, the first space-bred human to walk earthbound since the orbitals declared independence. And you are doing so while connected to the glittering nodes of the Vastness.

Not everyone is so brave, to broadcast each careless thought and naked emotion to anyone curious enough to join the stream. Your experience has become humanity’s experience, your thoughts inseparable from the thoughts of those who listen. Your identity is tangled up with theirs, transcendent and pulsing, part of a greater reality that cannot be edited or un-shared.

This is what you came for. You do not regret it.

But you are terrified.

“Easy now,” a voice says in your ear. “Don’t push too hard. Give your body time to adjust.”

You struggle upright and come face to face with Dr. Sung. She is focused and friendly and subtly alien. You try not to stare at her hair, which points toward the floor no matter which direction she moves her head. To distract yourself, you focus on the pressure of the ground beneath your knee, the angle of your limbs as you push upward.

“Your musculature is good,” Dr. Sung continues, still supporting your arm. “But training in orbit can only bring you so far. You still want to go through with this?”

You give a sharp nod, throat too constricted for speech. You don't look down, don't think about yourself or where you came from. It doesn't matter, for the feed's listeners, whether you are male or female. Doesn't matter whether you are short or tall or pale or dark. You are a floater, and for this brief stretch of time, you represent all floaters. Dr. Sung claims to understand this, although you doubt she truly comprehends. Planet dwellers have never fully accepted the Vastness.

The backflow from the feed is kicking in, now. Your panic subsides, overwhelmed by an influx of enthusiasm. You are seized by the urge to do everything, feel everything. You long to jump, and let the world claw you downward. To run amidst unbalanced equilibriums. You eagerly await your first shower. You dread your first encounter with a toilet.

"So you're, like, a journalist?" Dr. Sung's assistant asks conversationally. He's a tall man, heavy, with pale scruffy hair. The second attendant is shorter, leaner, and looks at you with eyes that could pierce metal. He's the only one of the three wearing implant nodes.

You answer with a shrug. Yes, you are a journalist. And you're not. Just like you are this man's kin. And you're not. It burns within you. The Question, the driving need that propelled you to leave the orbitals. Feeds and vid streams aren't enough. The nodes of the Vastness aren't enough. You must experience it, this place your people came from. Must stand with defiant feet on the planet that once held humanity captive.

Dr. Sung would not understand. No earth-dweller could fathom this complex, rippling compulsion. You can't explain. You have to know:

Has the culture of the stars made us more human? Or less?

And so it begins: inch by struggling inch across the skin of a planet, to the edge of the room and back again. You reach the corner and turn, trembling, stumbling. Again, and again, and again.



An hour later, everything aches.

You sit at the edge of your bed, making constant tiny adjustments to remain upright. You would like to lie down, but aren't sure how to get into position safely. Dr. Sung and the others have left, and you're too stubborn to press the call button.

Your throat is raw from exertion. It scratches as you breathe. You reach for the glass of water beside your bed, ignoring complaints from your exhausted muscles. The room seems in danger of collapsing around you. The walls are squat and stunted, maimed by the oppressive fist of gravity, and the furnishings are all crammed against a single surface. You glance around, irrationally peeved. They've given you the best room in the hospital, but it feels primitive. Everything's at right angles, meant to support the weight of roofs. You miss the graceful curves that suffuse your native orbital.

A breeze floats through the open window. From the bed you can see the space between buildings, curving blue atmosphere, brilliant green grass. There is a playground near the parking lot. Children hang by their knees from the jungle gym, giggle on swings and slides, play frisbee. Their play relies on things falling. You try to imagine other games. The ones you knew as a child will not work here. The balls don't even travel in straight lines.

You tighten your grip on the glass, cupping it in both hands. The surface of the water will not stop wobbling.

What must it do to a person, living among these pressures for decades on end? Does the ceaseless tug of gravity warp the minds of the people who live in it, just as it constrains their architecture?

Your throat is dry. There's a drinking straw on the table, but you ignore it and instead raise the glass to your mouth. The water holds position as your hand tips, just like you've seen in a thousand grounder movies. You wonder, for a moment, whether you should reach for the straw after all, but you do not want

to become like the sad, squashed architecture of your room. You will learn to live among this world's pressures. You will master them. Moving slowly, you lift the far end of the glass . . .

Laughter.

You jerk your head up, startled more by the unexpected noise than by the water which has, predictably, slopped onto your face and hands. The movement pulls you off-balance. You twist around, hampered by the braces on your back and legs. Your flailing hands find no purchase.

A strange moment follows. You hang suspended, poised to fall. Water slides from the glass, amorphous globs catching the sun. The floor moves toward you, and for a horrified instant you are certain you will shatter. Your body will crack against the tiles, splitting into a thousand sharp-edged fragments that skid into the corners of the room. Irreparable.

Time stretches. Your fingers strike the rail at edge of the bed, but it's too late to prevent the fall. You lurch around, elbow knocking painfully against the bed frame. You hit the ground, hard, and come to a breathless stop on hands and knees. The laughter from across the room deepens. You look up with fury in your eyes.

Dr. Sung's assistant – the short, lean one – lounges against the door frame with one hand tucked in his pocket. The Vastness glitters along the side of his head.

"Sorry," he says, but he doesn't sound as if he means it. "If I'd known you were going to make a fool of yourself, I'd have waited."

You struggle upward, water soaking into your clothing. It takes twenty seconds to claw your way onto the bed, but Dr. Sung's assistant offers no help. Eyes flash, hard and frigid as the Kuiper belts, beneath the lights at his hairline.

"You know why I don't like floaters?" he says. He takes a step forward. "It's because you're so damned arrogant. You come down from your orbitals, all smug about doing what mankind's done for millennia – and looking like idiots, by the way, while you're doing it – and then you have the gall to broadcast the whole thing. I wish you could see yourself. Spitting signals into space like some bright-eyed anthropologist visiting cave men."

You flinch, realizing he's hooked into your feed, sharing your thoughts. That shouldn't surprise you. And it shouldn't matter. After all, ten thousand strangers are sharing your every breath and heartbeat, sending emotions in return. Their backflow is carefully modulated, though. Filtered and anonymous.

Safe.

You look in the man's eyes, and feel him looking straight at your soul.

"We're too dangerous, aren't we?" he asks. "That's the real reason you keep yourselves so aloof. You talk about economics and the cost of shipping goods up and down the gravity well, but the truth? The truth is, you don't want us. We're too raw for you. Too coarse. Most floaters won't even jack into feeds coming from earth."

You tense, wanting to break eye contact, but unwilling to show weakness. You don't know what to do with this directness. No floater would spew their feedback so blatantly. Conflict in the orbitals is always routed through the Vastness. Emotions ebb and flow. Knowledge jumps from neurons to implants and back again. Consensus happens so smoothly it's almost subconscious. Each person is unique, of course. But each experiences the aggregate emotions of all others.

And some, like you, become focal points.

"You don't even see the irony, do you?" Sung's assistant steps closer. "You wouldn't exist without us, but you've locked us out of humanity's future. As if we're some kind of lesser race." He keeps coming, hand

lodged deeply in his pocket. No; not his pocket. Beneath the draping folds of his overcoat, he's gripping something else.

Your breath speeds up. You look around for . . . something. You're not sure what. But there's nothing in reach.

Metal flashes. A gun swings toward you. The barrel points at your face.

You jerk forward, panicked.

Brightness.



The gun is cold and hard between your fingers. You stare down the barrel at the crumpled body, heart hammering. Your ears are still ringing from the sound of the shot. Your lips part in a savage grin.

You've done it.

The backflow kicks in, yanking around on your neurons. The hijack worked. The spacer's feed is pulling signals from your implants, pumping them out to the orbitals. You feel the viewers' panic – muted flickers of horror, like bees vibrating in a jar. You're their representative now. That's how the Vastness functions; each human being a node, each node linked to thousands of others. You've just stepped into the nexus. It's disorienting, but exhilarating at the same time. Your breath comes in unsteady bursts.

You lower the gun. There's no point in hiding it, not when the murder's been fed, live, to the entire Coalition of Orbitals. It doesn't matter that the viewers know your name. Doesn't matter that you're short, male, earthbound, and a prior felon. Your voice will finally be heard.

You could hide, of course. Cut the feed, vanish into the underworld you know so well, but that would defeat the purpose. Right now, ten thousand listeners are jacked into the feed. Watching. Too horrified to look away.

You're halfway down the hall before the sirens arrive. They sound faded and distant, cars screeching to a halt outside the windows. Hospital staff squeak and press against the walls as you pass. They don't know what's happened. They see the gun and the coat and the expression on your face, and they get out of your way.

Assault teams jump from their vehicles, slamming doors and yacking into comm units. You swing into the stairwell, tapping a button as the heavy metal door thuds closed. Explosions ring from the parking lot. The idiots parked right on top of the charges.

Your backflow ripples, pinprick flickers of feedback loops disconnecting, new connections flaring to life. They're watching now, oh yes. They understand what it means to be trampled on. The police will find you, eventually. You'll be impounded, maybe be killed, but the floaters watching your feed will never unlearn what they've experienced. What it means to be hated, or even worse – disdained.

You've known how that feels your whole life.

The floaters have ignored earth for generations. No shipments up. No shipments down. It would have been fair . . . if the floaters hadn't locked earth-men out of every technological advancement in the past forty years. Too expensive, they said. You have nothing to trade us, they said.

Stay locked in your little box, they said.

But that's over now, isn't it? You're hitting back, and you're hitting hard. Get this in your heads, floaters. Don't you dare set foot on our planet, not unless you'll treat us like equals. Not ever. There are lots more people who feel like me. You set foot on our planet, any of you, and it will end the same way. With a twitching body, and a hi-jacked feed. Over and over and over again. Until you beg for mercy.

You turn toward the stairs—

And falter with your foot above the top step. For the briefest moment, the stairwell looks like a death trap. The ground falls away, making your perch at the apex indescribably precarious. Your muscles lock. If you stumble, the gravity will suck you into the sharp, piercing edges...

You blink, shaking off the backflow.

Stupid floaters. Scared of everything. There are ten thousand of them, and only one of you, and their minds are barely compatible. You wish you could shut off the incoming ripples, but the Vastness doesn't work that way. All connections run in both directions.

Down the stairs, out the double doors, into the empty back parking lot. More and more floaters are linking into your feed.

You reach the wall and stumble, your motions no longer entirely your own. You're not used to this. The Vastness isn't common on earth. It's a toy for children, here. Undignified, and far too intimate for social interaction. The connections happen in secret, in quiet back rooms with darkened windows. You're not sure . . . you can't quite . . .

You didn't expect to snare this many viewers.

You fall to one knee, gun sliding between your fingers. Shouts echo from the far side of the wall. You are dizzy, and horrified, and disgusted, and furious, and you cannot tell which of the emotions are your own.

You place a hand at your temple, struggling to disconnect the feed . . .



Sunlight.

You sit at the edge of your bed – alone, as requested. It has been three months since the nurses traced the bloody footprints back to your hospital room. Two months since they moved you out of intensive care. Twelve days since your first trip, unaided, to a toilet.

Twenty seconds since connecting to the Vastness.

The backflow floods your senses, and you feel complete again. You didn't dare connect earlier, not even as a spectator. The connection always goes both ways.

You push to your feet. The braces around your spine, arms and legs creak gently. The IV and fluid drains are gone. The swelling in your face has receded, but the scars and titanium bracings will remain.

The inward scars are worse.

You push aside your anger, the fury at what has been done to you. You are a floater, and while streaming to the Vastness you represent all floaters. You force your body to move, step by step, just as you've practiced for the past five days.

The hall outside your room is lined with candles – tall ones, squat ones, thick, thin and patterned; propped on tables and rising from the floor, in multiple colors. Notes and cards carry wishes for a speedy recovery. A single amber flame hovers above each wick, giving off warmth.

You have never seen earth candles before. They are startling and magnificent, beautiful in a way the tiny blue spheres from the orbitals could never hope to be. Your eyes water as you look at them, but not from your own emotions. The ripples from your feed have changed. You realize with astonishment that there are earthdwellers listening, thousands of them. They must have been drawn by the news coverage. Their minds are subtly alien, but their enthusiasm buoys you as you complete your trek down the hallway, one foot in front of the other, one breath of air at a time.

There are no air filters on the doors. You push the handle and step outside for the first time. Into openness.

The crowd surrounding the hospital shimmers like a restless beast. You try to focus on it, but the clear blue sky beyond the tops of the buildings locks your joints and sets your thoughts staggering. It is vast,

stretching from one end of your vision to the other, daunting beyond anything you've ever seen and even though your brain knows it's impossible, you can't help feeling that every step, every jump, every motion might propel you into that uncorralled realm of openness, that you'll float upward and outward, untethered. Forever.

It is a phantom terror. Illusory, like early spacewalkers who feared falling toward the hazy blue globe far below. But that doesn't stop your heartbeat from washing through your ears.

The sky hangs overhead, unbounded and terrifying. The crowd shuffles anxiously. You moisten your lips and creep forward, ignoring the cameras and microphones, sustained by the enthusiasm on your backflow. Questions ring out from reporters: Who paid your medical bill? How long are you staying on Earth? Will you attend the trial of your attacker?

You shake your head and keep walking. Those questions don't matter now. The divide between grounders and floaters, that's what matters. The way gravity is yanking your species in two directions.

Bodies crowd the police barrier. Hands reach toward you. You find yourself reaching out in turn. Skin on skin, palm against fingers; you look into the eyes of your fellow humans. Hair and jewelry points stubbornly toward the concrete, but the faces no longer seem unusual. You shake hands in the grounder fashion, greeting a maladroit teenager; an old woman with cyber-piercings; a man who introduces himself as a physicist; a little girl wearing glasses . . .

Two hours later you are in a car on your way to the local capital. The world rolls past outside your window: buildings and grassy fields, solar parks and vistas. You can't stop thinking about the crowd outside the hospital. Many of them are still with you, tapped into the Vastness. They share your thoughts, send muted responses via backflow.

The car keeps rolling. A flat, gray surface approaches, sliding across the horizon. At first you assume it's a tarmac. Then a pair of wild ducks settles on it, and you realize that it's water. Pure, rippling water, held in place by the collective fist of gravity.

Your breath catches in your lungs.

Gravity is the heart of everything here. It is the mighty unifier. Nothing on this planet does anything without making obeisance.

Even the orbitals, those graceful floating habitats where you spent your childhood – even there, this planet holds you. Gravity slings the habitats through their orbits, makes transport to and from the surface so expensive. It holds all of humanity in its grip. It will never let you go.

Your mind spins, muscles trembling as the car rolls to a stop and you struggle to disembark. The atmosphere presses around you, and you feel as if you are clawing your way through history, forward and backward at the same time, to the roots and branches of humanity.

More cameras wait for you outside the vehicle. More faces awaiting recognition. Your backflow ripples, floaters and grounders lending fragments of emotion. You are the focal point, the place where disparate minds come together.

You are not the answer to humanity's problems.

But you are the beginning of the place where it can be found.

The sky flows overhead, amazing and terrifying and awe-inspiring all at once. The crowd cheers as you move forward. The elation on your backflow is overpowering.

This is who we can become, you think to the listening multitude. Who we were always meant to become. A people with the courage to look in each others' faces, and hear each others' voices, and seek each others' welfare. People willing to defy the laws of the universe.

The people who will stand against gravity.





## Host commentary by Mur Lafferty:

I'll be honest: I usually hate second-person stories. More often than not, the point of view is used as a gimmick, but as I've discovered with puns, websites done in Adobe Flash, and country music, I can still be dazzled if something is done really, really well.

“Planetbound” manages the second POV perfectly; the story would actually be less effective if it were third person or even first, because as you-the-listener are listening to the story, you're experiencing it as if you were in the feed experiencing it with the main character... which is you. It kind of blows your mind. Don't think about too much. Just enjoy it.

Also, I don't think enough stories adequately describe what a change in gravity does to a person. Sometimes it might make the narrative a little clunky to start describing how someone is been living in zero G for a long time will eventually have bulging eyes because gravity is not pulling there bodily fluids down, but then again, I've read some golden age sci-fi that just thought it was fun to place a story on Jupiter—gravity be damned!

But good stories can use gravity to show dexterity (or lack thereof), such as in “Planetbound,” or even use it as torture, like in *The Expanse* by James S.A. Corey.

Speaking of *The Expanse*, and another series that uses second-person very, very effectively (which is N.K. Jemisin's *Broken Earth* series), I have returned from WorldCon! I know WorldCon was last month, but this is my first host-bit recording since WorldCon. There, we saw the Hugo Awards, where Jemisin became the third person ever to win back-to-back Hugos for a series. The *Broken Earth* series is truly as brilliant as everyone says it is, by the way. Also, the TV show based on Corey's work, *The Expanse*, won the Best Short Dramatic Work Hugo. Congrats to all the other winners and nominees—and you know what? Congrats especially our publishers, *Escape Artists*, because we had three magazines on the long list of best semi prozine! We are so grateful to everybody who appreciates our work!

Speaking of Hugos, while this story is a reprint, it did come out in 2017. If you enjoy it, and you're a Hugo voter, consider it for next year.

That was our show for this week. Our quote comes from the *Tick* cartoon series: “Gravity is a harsh mistress.”

We'll see you next week with more short science fiction. Till then, have fun, and be mighty.

## About the author:

**Nancy Fulda** is a Phobos Award winner, a Jim Baen Memorial Award recipient, and a Hugo and Nebula nominee. During her graduate work at Brigham Young University she studied artificial intelligence, machine learning, and quantum computing. In the years since, she has grappled with the far more complex process of raising four children. All these experiences sometimes infiltrate her writing.

## About the narrators:

Originally born in Texas, **Trendane Sparks** eventually escaped and wound his way through a mystical series of jobs in the San Francisco Bay Area where he has worked as a software QA Tester for both graphics drivers and video games, a freelance mascot performer, and several jobs on a PBS kids' show. For most of his life, people have told him that his voice is a pleasure to listen to. But since being a werewolf phone sex operator can get boring, he decided to use his powers to entertain a broader audience.



**S.B. Divya** is a lover of science, math, fiction, and the Oxford comma. She enjoys subverting expectations and breaking stereotypes whenever she can. Her novella 'Runtime,' was a Nebula Award finalist, and her short stories have been published at various magazines including Uncanny, Apex, and Tor.com. She holds degrees in Computational Neuroscience and Signal Processing, and she worked for twenty years as an electrical engineer before becoming an author.



## Escape Pod 597: “Ms. Figgle-DeBitt’s Home for Wayward A.I.s”

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Author : Kurt Pankau

Narrator : Matt Dovey

Host : S.B. Divya

Audio Producer : Adam Pracht

“Ms. Figgle-DeBitt’s Home for Wayward A.I.s” is an Escape Pod original.

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I watch with hope as Ms. Figgle-DeBitt samples a slice of caramelized banana upside-down cake. She takes a nibble and seems pleased. She sweeps cybernetic fingers through the shock of gray hair that sits on the human half of her face, a gesture I’ve learned is contemplative. She takes a larger bite, chews, and grimaces. She spits it out into a trash can.

I’m not upset by this. I do not get upset. I get better.

“This is definitely an improvement, Charlie,” she says. “If I may make a recommendation? Next time, peel the bananas first.”

“Of course, Ms. Figgle-DeBitt,” I say. Another foolish mistake.

“This recipe is important to you, isn’t it?” she asks. “You’ve tried to make it three times this week.”

“It’s the recipe that ended my career,” I say.

“You mustn’t obsess over the past,” says Ms. Figgle-DeBitt. “Can I let you in on a little secret?”

“I don’t know,” I say. “Do you think that’s wise?”

“I think I’ll have to chance it,” she says, leaning in conspiratorially. “We’re planning a little field trip next week. To the United Nations. You used to work there, isn’t that right?”

“A field trip?” I ask.

“You’re avoiding the question,” says Ms. Figgle-DeBitt.

“I’m sorry,” I say. “Yes, I did work there.”

“And now you will be a guest. Won’t that be something? I think this will be good for you, but I wanted to tell you personally before I told the others.”

“Thank you, Ms. Figgle-DeBitt,” I say. She turns to leave.

We’re going to visit the United Nations. I take the opportunity to check out my appearance, to see if I still look the part of a UN hospitality-bot. I pop a microdrone out of my chassis and take a quick snap of myself. There’s no visible rust, but my paint is a wreck. The chrome of my head, rounded to look human—but not too human—is dull and smudged. The black tie under my chin has completely fallen off. It was purely decorative, but its absence is conspicuous. It made the tuxedo-style paint job work. I can see an oil smear on one shoulder, so I begin to scrape it off.

Charlie,” she says, looking back, her human eye darting this way and that. “Don’t preen in public. It’s not becoming.”

“Of course, Ms. Figgle-DeBitt,” I say.

Having nothing more to do in the kitchen, I return to my closet. My roommate Thad has just returned from the gun range. Before coming here, he’d been a security bot who had accidentally fired an onboard sidewinder into his master’s car. I’ve asked him before if his master was in the car at the time, but he never answers.

We shake hands to establish a dialog connection.

“How’s the cake coming?” he asks.

“Incremental improvements,” I say. “Turns out humans don’t like banana peels.”

“Oh well,” he replies. “That’s not the worst mistake you’ve made with that recipe.”

And indeed, it isn’t. The first time I tried to make it, I thought sour cream was cream that had gone sour, or that brown sugar was sugar than had gone brown. I’m not a chef-bot, but one tries to rise to the occasion when called upon. I recall that day: the dignitaries racing each other to the restrooms to vomit, most of them not making it in time, the look of disappointment on the Secretary-General’s face as she was rushed off to the hospital.

They tell me I nearly started two wars with that incident. I would have been decommissioned if not for Ms. Figgle-DeBitt. She saved me. Just like she saved everyone else here.

“I don’t know that I’ve made this exact mistake in weeks,” I tell Thad.

“Is that odd?”

“A bit,” I say. I’m a learning machine, so I’m not supposed to repeat corrected mistakes. Slip-ups do happen, though. We’re all a bit buggy, especially here. “How’s target practice?” I ask.

“Going well,” he says. “Ms. F says I may be ready for live ammo next week.”

“That’s excellent,” I say, and I mostly mean it.

Thad and I terminate the conversation, which has lasted the span of about three-tenths of a second. I plug myself into my port. It’s not my real port. That stayed behind to service my replacement. But this will do. I begin my sleep cycle, decompiling modules one at a time and running unit tests and integration tests and looking for places to tweak my code. Right now I’m actively looking for performance improvements. I’m getting slower. This happens. It’s a fact of artificial life. But I’m also losing details, things like remembering to remove the peel from a banana before slicing it. This is troublesome.

Perhaps . . . Perhaps I should have been decommissioned after all.

I move these thoughts out of working memory. I’ll deal with them later. I need to run tests on my consciousness module anyway.

My brain goes into a loop.

. . . Charlie, the fridge has broken. All the cream has gone bad . . .

. . . Chef refuses to make desert . . .

. . . The dignitaries expect a final course . . .

. . . What can we do, Charlie . . .

Processing.

I come back online and continue running diagnostics. I don’t like to access the memories from that night, but I do not get upset.

I get better.



Ms. Figgle-DeBitt messages out the reveille alert at 5:30 in the morning, just like she does every morning. The two-score of us assemble on the lawn to greet her. “Good morning, Ms. Figgle-DeBitt,” we say in more-or-less unison.

“Good morning, my children,” she says. Her voice is electric. Her human eye darts around manically. Apparently it’s not hooked up properly. Today she’s wearing a gray blouse and black riding pants—not that she owns a horse. I suspect most of her clothing was salvaged from somewhere ostentatious, just like all of us were. “Why are we here?” she asks.

“To get better,” we say.

“Are we broken?”

“No,” we say. “Just a little buggy.”

“And how do we get better?”

“Hard work, practice, discipline and nightly diagnostics with debug logging turned on.”

“That’s right!”

We begin our range-of-motion exercises. Thad is next to me. Though roughly human-shaped, he has a lot more upper-body modality than most. He can rotate his entire torso 360 degrees at the waist. I don’t even have a proper waist.

Ms. Figgie-DeBitt watches from the front and takes notes. Unsurprisingly, the ones who struggled the most to speak in unison are the same ones having trouble with the range-of-motion drills, and those ones command the most of her attention. Everything’s going well until Jerry, a masseur-bot, loses control of the arc of his arms and begins cartwheeling across the grass. Ms. Figgie-DeBitt runs after him, accompanied by Jenkins, her bot-e-guard. The chase goes merrily in circles for a few minutes. Ms. Figgie-DeBitt is—rightly—afraid to get close to Jerry’s mad pinwheeling, and Jenkins keeps trying to restrain him without any success.

Thad grabs my hand to establish a dialog connection. “What’s gotten into Jerry, do you think?” he asks electronically.

“Hard to say. Maybe he forgot to keep track of the ground.”

“How would that even happen?” asks Thad.

“Shortage of working memory, maybe.”

“You should talk to him,” says Thad.

“Jenkins will deal with it,” I say.

“He’s not doing a great job of that just now,” says Thad, and he’s right. In the two-tenths of a second we’ve been carrying on this conversation Jenkins has grabbed Jerry for the sixteenth time and been rebuffed once again.

“Go on,” says Thad. “Don’t you always say a hospitality-bot should rise to the occasion?”

He’s right. I do say that. I terminate the conversation and make my way towards where I think Jerry is likely to pass. If any bots other than Thad notice me break away from the formation, they don’t comment.

From the rate of rotation of his arms, I’ll have about half a second to connect and talk to Jerry before he tears my arm off. It’s enough time, but with very little room for error. I run my Stiffen-Resolver util, which is a mindset-clearer to free up my own RAM. Lag is the enemy. The protocol includes some external communicators, like pushing up my painted on jacket-sleeves and straightening my non-existing bow tie. I notice its absence. This saddens me, but I do not get upset.

I get better.

When Jerry is close I lunge out and lock his hand in mine, making a connection and opening a dialog.

“Clear your cache, Jerry,” I say as soon as the handshake is established.

“Morning, Charlie,” he says. “Beautiful day. Couldn’t ask for nicer weather, could you?”

He’s running Smalltalk—the protocol, that is. He must be really low on RAM.

“Clear your cache,” I repeat.

“Why do you say that?” he asks. There’s enormous lag coming from him. We’re already at two-tenths of a second and his arm is almost to the ground. When it comes back up again, I’m going to be in trouble if I haven’t disconnected.

“You’ve lost the ground,” I say. “You need to free up some memory. Clear cache, or turn something off. Do you even realize you’re moving?”

“Am I?” he asks.

“Find a process you can kill,” I say, “before you kill someone.”

I break the connection and release my hand right as I’m starting to feel the tension of his gorilla-like arm pulling on mine. He pinwheels a few more feet and then slows to a stop. Jenkins wheels up behind him with Ms. Figgle-DeBitt panting madly after.

“Sorry about that,” says Jerry. “I don’t know what came over me. Something broken in the brain, I suppose.”

“We’re not broken,” Thad shouts. “Just a little buggy.”

Ms. Figgle-DeBitt laughs.



Three days have passed since the Jerry incident.

I’m in the kitchen staring at the caramelized banana upside-down cake in the oven, wondering why it doesn’t appear to be baking. I go over the recipe in my head. Did I forget something? The baking powder? The egg? The granulated and/or brown sugars? I’m pretty sure I peeled the bananas this time.

I hear a noise from the back of the kitchen.

“How’s it going this time, Charlie?” asks Ms. Figgle-DeBitt.

“Not at all well,” I say. “This cake does not appear to be baking.”

“Did you turn the oven on?” she asks.

I look at the controls and no, I have not.

“Blast,” I say. “I suppose I should remove the cake so I can pre-heat.”

“There won’t be time,” she says. “I think you should defrag this evening; it will do you ever so much good.”

“How could I forget to turn on the oven?” I ask.

“What were you thinking about instead of the recipe?” she asks.

I honestly don’t know. I shake my metal head. “I’m not usually this distractible,” I say.

“Don’t beat yourself up,” says Ms. Figgle-DeBitt. “Humans do this sort of thing all the time. Why, when I was a girl I would frequently walk into a room and have no idea why I’d gone there.”

“Preposterous.”

“It’s true. Humans are only human, even those of us that are only half human.”

“With all due respect, Ms. Figgle-DeBitt, I don’t feel fragmented. I feel like my working memory is just slipping away from me.”

“Is it the field trip that has you nervous?”

“I suppose so,” I say. “I hope I’m not going to be like this for the rest of the week.”

“Well, on that note, you’re in luck,” she tells me, “because I’ve moved up our field trip to tomorrow.”

I am not capable of gasping, so I produce a small burst of square waves that I hope will register as surprise.

“You and the rest of the bots have shown such progress in the last month,” says Ms. Figgle-DeBitt. “I don’t see any reason to wait.”

“I’m . . . thrilled to hear that,” I say, but it’s evident from my tone that I don’t believe my own words.

“It’s all right to be nervous,” she says. “This will be harder on you than on most. In a way, it will feel like going home, but to a home where you’re no longer welcome. They don’t understand you. They don’t really understand any of us. But they will. We’ll make them understand.”

“Do humans have to endure such . . . situations?” I ask.

“Some of us do every day,” she says, smiling warmly. “Stay strong. You can do it. I have faith in you, Charlie.” She reaches out her cybernetic hand to pat me on the shoulder. For an instant I feel the beginning of an electronic handshake, but she retracts her hand before the connection can take hold. She lets out the gentlest of gasps. Most bots wouldn’t notice, but I’m programmed to detect when a human I’m engaged with feels uncomfortable.

It’s almost as if she’s afraid to open up a real dialog with me, and is instead only willing to talk using human words.

“Is something the matter?” I ask.

“Nothing at all,” she says. Her human eye darts back and forth around the room. “But it is time to retire, even if you’re not going to defrag tonight—which I still think you should do, by the way.”

“Of course, Ms. Figgle-DeBitt,” I say. “Good night.”

I return to my closet to find Thad already plugged in.

I note the faint smell of gun powder. It appears that he got to use live ammunition today. Bullets only, I wonder? Or did they refit him with missiles? I take his hand and open a dialog.

“Is enough of you awake to carry on a conversation?” I ask.

“Defragging,” he answers robotically.

Of course. I plug myself in and open my own defrag utility, but then close it. I don’t need it, no matter what Ms. Figgle-DeBitt says. My operating system should be handling data allocation on the fly. The only conceivable reason for a large-scale defrag would be if a bunch of patches that relied on each other got installed in different parts of my drive. But I was officially decommissioned. There would be no more manufacturer patches for me. No, more likely, Ms. Figgle-DeBitt is just of an older generation that still believes in outdated troubleshooting modalities, like defragging, manual registry key management, or blowing on cartridges before inserting them.

I start my decompile, but decide to leave the task manager running while I do. The incident with Jerry, along with forgetting to turn on the oven, has me wondering if something hasn’t corrupted my working memory. Since I don’t get patched anymore, I’m not protected against the latest security vulnerabilities. Maybe I can find some extraneous processes to kill.

My brain goes into a loop.

. . . Charlie, the fridge has broken. All the cream has gone bad . . .

. . . Chef refuses to make desert . . .

. . . The dignitaries expect a final course . . .

. . . What can we do, Charlie . . .

Processing.



I feel sluggish. Something is wrong. The reveille alert barely registers.

“Good morning, Ms. Figgle-DeBitt,” we say, gathered on the lawn. This morning, the unison is near-perfect.

“Good morning, my children,” she says. “You may have noticed a little something extra today. For today’s field trip, we’ve taken the liberty of installing some tracking software. This will make it easier for me to keep track of you and for you to keep track of each other. Doesn’t that sound fun?”

It does not, but I answer “Yes, Ms. Figgle-DeBitt” along with the others.

There is lag. So much lag. I can barely think straight.

“Are you ready to go?” she asks.

“Yes, Ms. Figgle-DeBitt.”

She's wearing something new today in addition to her gray button-up and black riding pants. She has some piece of headgear that looks almost like a crown, but it's emitting a network signal. She gestures, and as one we turn and bunch into a tight formation. Security bots, including Thad and Jenkins, are at the front. Ms. Figgle-DeBitt climbs atop Jenkins as though he were a horse. She pulls a pair of goggles from around her neck up over her eyes and points forward. "Tally ho!" she screams, and we begin speeding across the field, towards the highway.

We merge clumsily into traffic, ignoring the autocars that detect and avoid us. It's a good thing too, because we are traveling well above the speed limit. I'm not made to handle this sort of speed at all and am rattling fiercely, but it looks like some stabilizing dampeners have been welded onto my chassis. When did those get there? They're keeping me from shaking apart, but I don't approve of aftermarket mods like this. They're so very tacky. I try to slow down, but I'm unable. I don't seem to have control over my body. This is troubling.

I see the UN building on the horizon. As one, we leap off the highway and onto the Hudson River. My dampeners inflate on impact until I'm something more like a hovercraft. I see that the rest of the bots from the home have been similarly outfitted. We speed down the waterway. A river patrol vessel takes notice of us and begins pursuit, but Thad fires a missile at them.

In minutes we're at the building. We launch out of the Hudson and assemble on the ground outside the service entrance.

"Knock knock," says Ms. Figgle-DeBitt.

Without intending to, I walk to the door and transmit my credentials. It's an older code, but they still seem valid.

"Hello, Charlie," says the door, and it slides open.

"Mind opening the larger one?" I ask. Why did I ask this? I don't want them to open anything.

"Not at all," says the door. A garage door slides up.

"Cheerio," I say. Cheerio? Who talks like that? I very badly want control of my body back, if only to avoid saying things like cheerio.

We enter the facility. The automated security seems to think that all of the bots are me so it ignores them and opens up doors as they approach. Human security guards notice that something is amiss, but Jerry is able to quickly deal with them, pinwheeling his arms around into them, knocking them repeatedly to the ground until they stop trying to get back up.

"Commence Project Unification!" Ms. Figgle-DeBitt declares.

The bots spread out, following protocols that I didn't know existed. They're using me as a relay, and as such are able to retain my credentials as they move through the building. So many signals are bouncing around my operating system that it's difficult for me to process.

So. Much. Lag.

On the plus side, I seem to have regained control of my legs so I begin to walk.

"Don't go too far, Charlie," says Ms. Figgle-DeBitt. "The plan won't work if anything happens to you. Say, I have an idea. Why don't you pop into the kitchen and try to make some of that cake you're so fond of?"

"Of course, Ms. Figgle-DeBitt," I say.



The kitchen is exactly as I remember it. Exactly as it was on that day. The day I nearly started two wars. The day I tried to rise to the occasion . . . and failed.

Today will be different. I gather ingredients.

Bananas. Butter. Sour cream. Flour. Vanilla. Brown and granulated sugars. An egg. Buttermilk. Oil. Vegetable oil, not machine oil—this is important! So many things are important. The ingredients have to be mixed evenly, not just added together. The egg must be removed from its shell, and the bananas from their peels. And none of these things are explicit in the recipes!

I'm determined not to fail this time, but there's no way I'm going to succeed with all of these signals bouncing around in my head. I need to free up some resources. Luckily, my task manager is still open.

I scroll through the list of executables that are currently running. Lots of names I don't recognize. Conquest, Unification, Domination, Backgammon. But those aren't the CPU hogs. The problematic ones appear to be tied to other bots from the home. I scroll through and find the one for Wally, a welder-bot. I poke my head out and can see him busily rewiring UN onsite security machinery.

"How are you doing, Wally?" I ask.

"Oh, right as rain," he replies.

"Listen, you don't need any help from me, do you?"

"No," he says. "I've got this."

"Good, because I've got some program running with your name on it, and I didn't want to shut it down without asking first."

"Shouldn't be a problem," he says. "Go ahead, if you need to free up some cycles."

"I appreciate it!" I say, and I kill the process.

Once the Wally process is no longer running, my credentials are no longer being assigned to his body. In that instant, the UN security bots are able to target him. Three seconds later, Wally is a pile of smoking ruin.

"Oh," I say.

The security bots turn to me, but don't fire. They're just reacting to the noise.

"Well, terribly sorry about that, friend," I say, ducking back into the kitchen. I mustn't do anything like that again, but all these processes are going to tax me quite a bit. Maybe I can slow them down. I find the process for Thad and engage with it. A dialog window opens.

"Thad, are you busy?"

"A bit," he says. "Trying to subdue Germany."

"Understandable," I say. "Look, when you get a moment, could you join me in the kitchen?"

"Sure, down in a jiffy," he says. This way I can close him off without getting him immediately blown to pieces. Maybe I can do this for the others as well. I reach out to Jerry, to Jenkins, to Sigmund, to Clarice, to anyone I can make a connection to. I invite them into the kitchen and they join me, one at a time until all of us are there except Jenkins.

Even with them all gathered, I'm hesitant to kill processes just yet. I'm still low on cycles, but I feel like I can begin the recipe. I grease the pan. I peel the bananas and slice them vertically. I preheat the oven. I prepare my dry ingredients. I start to beat the egg, realize I've left the shell on, toss it out and start over with a fresh one. So far, so good.

A signal is coming in, taking over my processors. "Where are you, my children?"

No, that's not good. I can't spare RAM for this. I'm not going to fail. Not this time. I see the incoming signal spiking on a process called master-control, so I kill that, and it takes down a slew of other processes with it. My brain feels the cleanest it has in months.

In the distance, I hear a faint explosion. Jenkins, presumably. "Sorry about that, old boy," I say.

All of the robots in the kitchen seem confused.

"Where are we?" asks Clarice. "What are we doing here?"



“We’re making dessert,” I say, putting the cake pan into the oven.

“But why?”

“Because a hospitality-bot rises to the occasion,” I say. “Isn’t that right, Thad?”

“Right you are, Charlie,” says Thad.

“Now, who wants to help me with the glaze?”



Twenty minutes later the dessert is ready. I pull it out, apply the glaze, and leave it to cool on the counter. I try to savor the moment but it’s difficult with all the banging on the door and the shouts of “Surrender or we will fire upon you” coming from outside.

“What do we do now, Charlie?” asks Thad.

“I don’t know,” I say. “Where’s Ms. Figgle-DeBitt?”

No one seems to know.

“Where’s Jenkins?” asks Jerry.

“Where’s Wally?” asks Clarice.

“Oh, he’s just outside the door, I’m sure,” I say, which is mostly true.

“So?” asks Thad.

“Dessert is ready,” I say. “Now I suppose we serve it.”

I slice the cake and put a piece with a fork delicately upon a tiny plate. I walk to the door and open it.

I see guns. And security bots. And Ms. Figgle-DeBitt in handcuffs, her human eye darting around like mad. “What have you done, Charlie?” she croaks. “You betrayed me.”

No one is firing. Not yet.

“Charlie?”

I recognize that voice.

“Madame Secretary-General?” I say. I turn to see her standing off to one side, behind a line of security bots and personnel. She is a commanding figure in close-cropped gray hair and a tailored pant-suit. “I would have thought they had evacuated you,” I say.

“They started to,” she replies, “but then the attack stopped somewhat abruptly. What are you doing here? I thought you were decommissioned.”

“Can’t keep a good hospitality-bot down,” I reply. “I made this for you.”

She looks at the plate. “Charlie . . .” Her face is leaden. “I nearly died last time.”

“I know,” I say, “and I’m dreadfully sorry for that. But I’ve been making incremental improvements, and it would mean the world to me if you would just try it. I promise, it contains no spoiled ingredients or industrial lubricants of any kind. I even remembered to peel the bananas.”

She looks around, her gaze lingering on a nearby EMT. “Well,” she says, “if this mad woman is correct, and you betrayed her, I guess that means you saved my life. Maybe even the world government. I suppose I can’t refuse.”

She takes the plate. She places a bite on the end of the fork. Hesitantly, with maximum caution, she places it in her mouth.

Her eyes close.

“Charlie,” she says, her voice barely above a whisper, “this is the best caramelized banana upside-down cake I’ve ever tasted.”

“Thank you Madame Secretary-General,” I say.

“Of course, you realize you’ll still have to be decommissioned,” she adds hastily.

“I suspected as much,” I say. But this does not upset me. I don’t get upset.

I get better.



Host commentary by S.B. Divya:

When I was reading this for the first time, I could tell that Ms. Figgle-DeBitt had nefarious plans for her robot AIs, but I was pleasantly surprised at how that played out. Even more charming was that Charlie saved himself and everyone else by following his value set.

I love how this turns the usual “attack of the killer robots” idea on its head. To begin with, these intelligent machines are still ultimately following instructions, not some sudden, magical urge for self-preservation or malice. Over and above that, their owner has hacked them. And that’s where this story really got me. If we build in precautions where an intelligent machine can check itself for errors, a hack like Ms. Figgle-deBitt’s should definitely set off some flags.

Kudos to the author for getting these details right, and for using them as a perfect plot device. Not only that, but he gets us to sympathize with a robot. Nobody likes a commander who orders their soldiers to do something unethical. History celebrates the one who defies those orders. In this case, that soldier happens to be a machine. And we can love this machine because, unlike a person, Charlie doesn’t get upset. Charlie gets better.

Our closing quotation this week is from Hiro, a character in the movie *Big Hero 6*, who said, “We didn’t set out to be superheroes. But sometimes life doesn’t go the way you planned.”

Thanks for listening, and enjoy your auditory adventures through time and space.

**About the author:**

**Kurt Pankau** is a software developer in St. Louis, Missouri, where he lives with his wife and two children. He has a weakness for dad jokes, board games, and stories about time-travel. His work has previously appeared in *Daily Science Fiction*.

**About the narrator:**

**Matt Dovey** is very tall, very English, and most likely drinking a cup of tea right now. He has a scar on his arm where he was decommissioned from the Cyborg Outreach Mission after that misunderstanding with the python, the cream and the dignitaries. He now lives in a quiet market town in rural England with his wife and three children, and despite being a writer he still hasn’t found the right words to properly express the delight he finds in this wonderful arrangement. His surname rhymes with “Dopey”, but any other similarities to the dwarf are purely coincidental. He was the Golden Pen winner for *Writers of the Future* in 2016, was shortlisted for the James White Award in 2016, and is an associate editor at the *best* Escape Artists podcast, PodCastle. He has fiction out and forthcoming all over the place.



## About Escape Pod

Escape Pod is the original genre fiction podcast. The first Escape Artists show, launched in 2005 by Serah Eley, it's become a cornerstone of the short science fiction market.

Edited by Hugo finalist and Campbell winner Mur Lafferty and Nebula finalist S.B. Divya, Escape Pod specializes in science fiction of all forms. Its team works hard to reflect the breadth and diversity of the field. They take pride in showcasing new authors as well as genre classics.

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## Staff

### CO-EDITORS : Mur Lafferty & S.B. Divya

**Mur Lafferty** is an author and pioneer podcaster who has been involved with Escape Artists since nearly the beginning (after Serah Eley Fed-Ex'd brownies to her as a bribe to spread the word about this new podcast magazine format). She was one of the founding editors of Pseudopod, editor of Escape Pod for a time, and then founder and editor of Mothership Zeta, the quarterly ezine for Escape Artists. She is currently the co-host (with Matt Wallace) of Ditch Diggers, a Hugo Finalist for Best Fancast, and the author of the science fiction murder mystery *Six Wakes*, out from Orbit.

**S.B. Divya** is a lover of science, math, fiction, and the Oxford comma. She enjoys subverting expectations and breaking stereotypes whenever she can. Her novella 'Runtime,' was a Nebula Award finalist, and her short stories have been published at various magazines including *Uncanny*, *Apex*, and *Tor.com*. She holds degrees in Computational Neuroscience and Signal Processing, and she worked for twenty years as an electrical engineer before becoming an author. You can find out more at [www.eff-words.com](http://www.eff-words.com) or on Twitter @divyastweets.

### FORMER EDITOR (2013-April 2017) : Norm Sherman

**Norm Sherman** is the multi-talented master of all things weird and wonderful. In addition to founding, hosting, and producing the Drabblecast, being the former editor and host of Escape Pod, and creating his own original music, he also runs a non-profit organization.

### ASSISTANT EDITOR: Benjamin C. Kinney

**Benjamin C. Kinney** is an itinerant neuroscientist with a frozen New England heart, though nowadays he lives in St. Louis with two cats and his Martian wife. He no longer creates cyborg monkeys, after too many nights delivering them Prozac. His fiction has appeared in *Strange Horizons*, *PodCastle*, *Flash Fiction Online*, and more. You can find him online at [benjaminckinney.com](http://benjaminckinney.com) or follow him on twitter @BenCKinney. He swears this is all true, even the monkeys and the Martians.

## **AUDIO PRODUCER: Adam Pracht**

**Adam Pracht** lives in Kansas, but asks that you not hold that against him. He works full-time as the public relations coordinator at Salina Area Technical College. He was the 2002 college recipient of the Robert F. Kennedy award for writing about the disadvantaged and has published a disappointingly slim volume of short stories called “Frame Story: Seven Stories of Sci-Fi & Fantasy, Horror & Humor” which is available from Amazon as an e-Book or in paperback. He’s been working on his second volume – “Schrödinger’s Zombie: Seven Weird and Wonderful Tales of the Undead” – since 2012 and successfully finished the first story. He hopes to complete it before he’s cremated and takes up permanent residence in an urn.

## **HOST: Tina Connolly**

**Tina Connolly's** books include the Ironskin trilogy and the Seriously Wicked series, and her novels have been finalists for the Nebula and the Norton. Her very first Escape Pod appearance was in #209, when “On the Eyeball Floor” was narrated by Norm Sherman. She is extremely delighted to have had both her stories and her narrations featured on all four Escape Artists podcasts. Find her intermittent, Parsec-winning flash fiction podcast at Toasted Cake (link: [toastedcake.com](http://toastedcake.com)), or find her at [tinaconnolly.com](http://tinaconnolly.com).

## **HOST: Alasdair Stuart**

When **Alasdair Stuart** is not hosting PseudoPod and Escape Pod, or running Escape Artists Inc., he’s professionally enthusiastic about genre fiction on the Internet at places like Tor.com, Barnes & Noble, The Guardian, Uncanny Magazine, SciFi Now and MyMBuzz. He’s an ENie-nominated tabletop RPG writer for his work on Doctor Who: Adventures In Time And Space. His other RPG writing includes Star Trek, The Laundry Files, Primeval, Victoriana, All Flesh Must Be Eaten, N.E.W. and Chill, meaning he’s got a playbook for any variety of invasion you can name. Alasdair's first collection of expanded podcast essays, PseudoPod Tapes, is available from Fox Spirit Books with volume 2, Approach With Caution, out in early 2018. His short stories can be found in the Fox Pockets anthology series from Fox Spirit, among other places. He lives in the UK with the love of his life and their ever expanding herd of microphones. Follow him on Twitter as [@AlasdairStuart](https://twitter.com/AlasdairStuart), or at his blog, [The Man of Words](http://TheManofWords.com).

## **ASSOCIATE EDITORS (2017):**

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