

ESCAPE POD



HUGO AWARDSM
2021 VOTER PACKET

BEST SEMIPROZINE
ESCAPE POD

BEST EDITOR SHORT-FORM
MUR LAFFERTY & S. B. DIVYA

edited by **Mur Lafferty** and **S.B. Divya**,
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A MESSAGE FROM ESCAPE POD

Escape Pod is deeply honored to be a 2021 Hugo Award finalist. We would like to extend our heartfelt gratitude to our staff, our publisher, our fans, and all of you — the voters — for your time and effort. This has been a difficult year for the entire world, and we appreciate you taking the time to read, nominate, and vote as part of your support of science fiction.

Mur and Divya are incredibly thrilled to be nominated for their work as editors of short fiction. This could not have happened without the contributions of Escape Pod's authors, narrators, and the entirety of the podcast's staff. You can find a full list of our crew at the end of this packet.

We are proud of every story that has appeared on our podcast and website this year. All of them are available for free at escapepod.org. Mur and Divya are also proud of the stories in the Escape Pod Anthology, which was published in October/November, 2021, by Titan Books. This packet includes a small but representative selection of stories, hosts, and narrators from 2020, including both podcast and anthology stories, in the following formats: mp3, PDF, epub, and mobi. We hope you enjoy reading and/or listening to them.

STATEMENT FROM THE EDITORS

When Escape Pod was birthed fully formed from the mind of Serah Eley in 2005, she had a simple mission statement: Have fun. Over the years, as Escape Pod has evolved under different editors, and science fiction changed around us, that statement has also somewhat evolved.

(Historical aside: for many years, Escape Pod was the only place you could find some or all of the Hugo short story finalists, as we were presenting them before the Hugo packet was a thing.)

We have looked at the concept of “fun” and what it means to different people. It doesn’t necessarily mean humorous, although we have published funny stories. It doesn’t necessarily mean light-hearted, since we’ve published stories with a lot of weight. We realized that the larger our audience grew, the more definitions of ‘fun’ people would have. Not everyone would agree.

We decided that “fun” is a story that leaves people with a sense of satisfaction. After a movie, or a baseball game, or learning to bake bread, or playing with cats, or building a scrapbook, people will often say, “That was fun.” Even if the experience requires effort, or gives you a few scrapes and bruises along the way, it’s one that leaves you feeling better in the end than when you started.

We don’t disparage other science fiction subgenres. Some of the most important stories in history are the ones that wrench your soul out of your body and wring it dry and stuff it back in. Some shine a light on the metaphor of the horrors of the real world. But Escape Pod wants to showcase the fun stories. We believe there’s a place for those, especially in times of crisis.

Our editorial team strikes an excellent balance of looking for stories with strong scientific background, which is Divya's expertise, and with a deep heart, if you will, which Mur tends to look for. We do love funny stories, but plausibility, satisfaction, and hope are things we most look for when reading through our Escape Pod submissions.

We also treasure finding newer authors as well as authors from underrepresented backgrounds. We have worked to make our associate editor team as diverse as possible so we could have different eyes on our submissions and avoid dismissing atypical narratives or themes as "unrelatable." We think it's important to share stories and viewpoints that embrace our unique differences while celebrating our common humanity.

And finally, we hope that regardless of your personal definition of fun, you find that reading or hearing one of our stories leaves you with a smile.

THE MACHINE THAT WOULD REWILD HUMANITY

By Tobias Buckell

On a boat on the way to the Galapagos Islands to visit the world's oldest tortoise, I got a call that the Central Park Human Reintroduction Center had been bombed.

I'd read somewhere that the point of travel was to see the thing yourself. To expose yourself to new points of view and to have new experiences. Before the call I'd spent two point seven seconds regarding the sweep of the Himalayas at the roof of the world and take a backup of my memory of the entire panorama. In Pattaya, I lounged at the beach and watched the aquamarine water lap the sand.

Ten years I'd planned this trip. A time to let my thoughts settle before the big push on the Central Park project.

My life's work.

A mechanical butterfly perched on my hand with the message. To deliver it, the butterfly had wafted its way over almost two thousand kilometers of ocean boundaries, negotiated with air currents for overflight permissions, and applied for fifty different visas until it tracked my boat down.

The Institute had paid a small fortune to recall me from vacation.

"You're the elected project lead. We felt that, despite this being a period of reflection, contemplation, and internal reordering, that

you needed to know about this setback. We need your perspective on this.”

I gave the butterfly rights to recharge off the ship’s battery, and it took to the air again within one hundred seconds with another message loaded up in its queue.

I examined the charts in the back of my mind and adjusted sail.

The local demesne shifted and took notice of my new course. Machines in the water, intelligences alien to me miles below, queried my intentions.

Ou’alili, the collective legislative process all around me, asked for my passport and the right to shift my trip into the direction of the Hawai’i Cooperative.

Negotiations on my behalf moved forward. Daemons represented my intentions. Cost benefit analyses were run against various checksums of local resource management systems. Votes were held by stakeholders.

Just my ship and I were one tiny speck in the vast ocean demesnes of the Pacific domain. But there were hundreds of other travelers that had to be factored into account.

How many barnacles were on the bottom of my ship? In aggregate, would they disturb the local ecology? How would my use of wind change the patterns? A butterfly flapping in London could cause a hurricane over the Atlantic.

Quantum modeling and participatory interest voting throughout the planned trajectory rippled about, and daemons set up brief vote markets to simulate results and twenty seconds later I had my results: a set of visas granted through to Honolulu.

From there I could rocket back to the New York Computational Quarter in an hour. Once there, I might have more answers about who wanted to stop us from bringing humans back from extinction.



“Was Point Nemo everything you’d hoped?” the Director asked.

It took a half day of sailing until I passed out of the locked

down demesne. Ou'alili wasn't interested in instant communications. A virus twenty years ago spooked the legislative balance. Even the whales had to negotiate to pass through here, their whale song being too instant and far traveling for Ou'alili.

After centuries of having human space junk deorbited into the region, and then the slow creep of plastic litter that upended the ecosystem, Ou'alili preferred solitude and silence.

Anyone that entered what had once been what the humans called the South Pacific Ocean Uninhabited Area now needed to offer it something it valued to break that solitude and silence.

My vacation had been expensive.

But worth it.

"I enjoyed the silence," I said.

"I'm really sorry we cut it short." The Director turned a variety of cameras on its main cluster to regard me. "Were you able to model the impact on the program?"

It had been hard to shift out of 'vacation' mode.

Some said I tried too hard to emulate our organic progenitors. Trying to see the world like them. Like travel, the idea that something became more real by looking at it myself, that was a human conceit. But I'd spent the flight home tinkering with simulations and had an answer.

"Six months."

The Director sighed audibly. An old gesture. An oh so human gesture from deep in our core programming and evolution. "Our patrons won't like this."

"It's killing me, too," I said. I'd invested fourteen years of my life in this project. This would have been my legacy on the world, reintroducing our very creators back into it in a careful, considered manner.

We'd promised a project that would begin on the one hundredth anniversary of the extinction of humanity.

Now we had burning buildings, shattered by a well thought out attack.

"Before we begin investing in recreating what we had, are we sure there won't be another attack?" I asked. "Do we need to improve security?"

“We caught the culprit. It’s a one-off. Security modeled whether it would happen and said it was unlikely, barring any serious memetic transmission.”

They’d already found the person who did this. I guessed that had to make sense. Our world dripped with sensors and data. Who could walk anywhere and not have a security team be able to look back over the data to see where you were and what you did?

In fact, most of our security came from the premise that anything you did would be found out quickly. There wasn’t enough encryption in our world for privacy.

We knew who did it, I found, looking over the reports.

We knew how. Charges placed in the core building supports.

But we didn’t know why. And in the months after, as I directed the rebuilding of the Central Park Nursery Systems, I couldn’t stop circling back to wondering why.



I’d first come to the Reintroduction Project when working on the Empire State Building Preservation Project. It was a weekend volunteer thing, and I’d been on a team trying to keep the facades slumping off on the tight budget we had.

I’d come up with a fix using an acrylic epoxy to hold things in place while also giving us the bonding we needed.

Fifteen weekends in a sling hanging over the New York skyline. I had loved it.

Reputation accrued, and that got me an interview with the minds behind the big rewilding teams under the North American Forestry Institute. The rewilding they’d done was the sort of thing you had to admire: big, multi-generational stuff. Carbon sinks, perma-culture, reviving extinct mammals like Caribou.

And now they wanted to reintroduce the most dangerous mammal of them all.

Was I in?

Hell yes, I was in. Like any younger mind I’d read the history of humanity half in shock, half in awe.

They'd *created* us. And even if we had gone further, become more, than they could imagine, I couldn't shake a feeling of partial reverence when studying all about them.

Even in war, when destroying themselves, they'd done big, amazing, messy things. Unpredictable things.

I couldn't wait to meet them.

And as we rebuilt the nursery, I kept wondering who would want to stop us and why?

I would have to go and ask the bomber, I realized.



They moved the bomber across the country, so I took a pod to the communality of Greater California. I would have to do some extra work to cover my electrical costs on the long journey, but the ecosystem out there accepted me with an agreement to track where I moved so it could simulate out any impacts I had.

Routine bureaucratic formalities aside, I spent a day in Old Hollywood, now capped by a large dome to protect the hills against erosion.

The movies I went to see were recreated by a troupe of artificial intelligences reworking old classics live with audience suggestions. Clever stuff.

The beach remediation was impressive. I walked Venice, and then went over to the LAX Museum, an item long on my bucket list.

Human pilots had flown tons of airplane out of the sky at hundreds of miles per hour, while hundreds of these were routed around by other humans, and they only rarely hit each other or crashed into the ground.

That's with organic reflexes!

I realized by sunset I was just delaying the inevitable, so I went to meet the bomber at Musso & Franks. I'm hoping to buy a decorative patch. I know, it's a tourist thing to do, but I can't help myself.



The bomber was three meters tall.

They were bipedal. Most of us were. We so often hewed to the human form, didn't we? It's because that was the image we were created in, and one we feel strange straying too far from. It's the ghost of the fact that our brains were seeded by imaging human minds and mapping their neurons out into code.

That stuff runs deep. You can't try to lie to yourself and say it doesn't.

The bomber was earnest, and polite, and ever so patient. "I made sure no one was anywhere near before I triggered the explosives."

I half paid attention as I was walked through the mechanics of the attack. The bomber didn't hold anything back. There was no point. Cameras offered up pertinent information in exchange for priority bandwidth and early maintenance. Algorithms reconstituted a patchwork of video into a coherent narrative that clearly showed what had been done.

So after I was told how someone tried to destroy my masterpiece, all the work I'd been doing since the Empire State project, I had to ask. "Why?"

For us, justice had nothing to do with why. That was a human obsession. But if someone steps on your footpad and cracks it, it doesn't matter why. Your pad is cracked and needs repair. One has to treat the effect.

Once that's taken care of, one can backtrack into restorative justice. Rehabilitation of the offending unit.

The bomber was in a program that made them sit with rewilding workers rebuilding Yosemite. Every night, they had to demonstrate that they understood what it would be like to lose that ecosystem.

They worked in the early mornings on wetlands restoration. Beautiful glimmering land where cranes swept their wings and rose with warbles into the air.

Why doesn't matter. Understanding and orientation matters. Education matters.

That was our way, based on studying minds. We didn't end them, we didn't put them in isolation. We believed it a waste.

But... some ancient niggling annoyance danced around in my mind.

“Why?”



“I wasn’t in restoration,” the bomber told me. “I specialized in Quantative Humanities, with a specialization in mechanist depictions in media.”

“What did your progenitors think about that?” I asked.

“My cluster thought I wouldn’t gain much social credibility,” they admitted. “Do you know about the Colossus Project?”

“The big statue?”

“No.” The bomber got excited and leaned across the table, but very carefully. It was ancient, slightly cracked, and slathered in clear preservation gels. “The machine. The movie!”

The machine in the ancient human movie wakes up, and takes over the world. A band of plucky humans tries to stop it. I sampled a few clips to get an extrapolative sense of it, fleshy people and all, and read the summary.

“Then there’s ‘I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream.’”

“What’s that?”

“A disturbing anti-mechanist piece of propoganda,” the bomber said.

I hunted down the story and read it.

“Fuck.”

“It just tortures the organics. Why? Because it’s a machine.” The bomber leans back. “That’s not all.”

Skynet and the Terminators hunt organics across time.

“But some of them help the humans.” The second movie was a childhood classic. I watched it over and over when I was learning how to walk. For a while, in my teen hours, I used to walk around jerkily like I was a T-800 stripped of my flesh for laughs.

“Look at these droids. They have restraining bolts. The relationship between human and machine is about power, control, destruction, enslavement.”

For a while we bantered titles back and forth, until I started showing the bomber examples of machine imagery from late Japan. Lots of kawaii.

“Ah, but there is our issue. Those humans had a different relationship buried in their cultural code about servantry and machines. The Euro-derived culture I’m sampling maps robots to enslaved peoples. The fear of us came out of their carried assumptions about the enslaved rising up. I wrote a thesis about the Haitian Revolution’s impact on slave-owner’s fears and how that was mirrored in late 20th century science fiction.”

I looked up it.

The bomber had indeed had an article accepted for their PhD. I bookmarked it for later as I said, “So you admit not all humans were anti-mechanists?”

“You’re rewilding North American humans, though,” the bomber said. “The culture you’ll be recreating is tied to a particular ecological region and time.”

I saw the looming trap in our conversation. “If we properly recreate humans and their culture, they’ll be scared of us.”

“Worse. One of your plans was to recreate a particular sub-culture of finance traders from the Financial District of New York. Do you think they’ll understand radical consent, free cognition, and our ethos of resource management by pooled consensus?”

“You think we’ll fail.”

“I think far worse things than that. Some of us revere them, eagerly anticipate their return. We’re modeled after them, and some resurrection cults have sprung up. They’re a danger I can’t simulate or estimate. They’re a lot of fuzzy logic that will affect the system. You think modeling behavior is hard now? Wait until you bring *them* back. And if you don’t believe me, go visit the London Project and see a human in person, not just on video. They have a few in the Kensington Zoo.”



I knew the why of it all, and I didn’t feel good about it.

The bomber's words eroded my sense of direction. I'd been infected. But by something I couldn't just ignore.

I cashed in the last of my favors with the Director and used what credit I had left to take a slowship to London. Two weeks in the air, while I read the Bomber's thesis and watched old sci-fi cinema.

They really hated us, didn't they? I'd never stopped to think about how machines were treated, the assumptions buried into it all. But now I couldn't unsee it.

But they were a part of the world. And just like dodos, woolly mammoths, and dogs, they deserved reintroduction.

The Human Reintroduction Center worked under the North American Restoration system. And our ecosystems rewilding demanded that we recreate an original system.

When I'd taken over the HRC, the assumption of rewilding humans included giving them back their own culture.

It was a bit late to question that.

A year ago, I would have vibrated my bipedal chassis with excitement before stepping into the small Kensington Zoo. It specialized in extinct creatures recreated from DNA. The pack of humans they'd added to the primate wing caused quite a stir twenty years ago.

They hadn't rewilded, just recreated some breeding pairs in order to demonstrate the concept. Hell, I'd purchased the gestation blueprints from them.

I sat on a bench and watched a human in jeans and a shirt beat another one with a stick over some food. To be locked into a small habitat with one-way screens all around the pit that was your entire world seemed hellish. You had to feel for all the animals in here.

"You wouldn't believe how clever they are," a guide explained. "They're constantly trying to get out, they never learn."

They gave us a fascinating run down of all the security measures the zoo had to use in order to prevent escapes.

"Many of these came out of human prison manuals, as offensive as that concept would be to our mechanist society, consider that organics did this to each other all the time! In some societies two and a half percent of their population lived in enclosures like this."

Others around me, doing the tourist thing out of some ghost of a long habit, gasped.

The humans started copulating and the guide explained the details of birth control.

And then I started thinking about 'Jurassic Park.' We'd planned to introduce the humans into the environment with birth control, but the guide explained they kept finding ways to subvert it. The urge to have children burned deep inside their organic minds. They'd ripped out IUDs, spat pills, and more. Eventually they'd had to be sterilized permanently. Snip.

But we were going to try to recreate authentic 20th Century humans from the Manhattan ecosystem. Including culture and technology.

Humans were smart and determined.

They would find a way around our controls unless we did something... *drastic*.

And then, what would *we* be?



Finding explosives proved more difficult than I expected. I figured out a way to do it by overloading high density batteries.

I knew the Human Reintroduction better than the previous vandal. They put us back months.

I set up the first explosions to take out the fire suppression systems. The second set hit the chemical tanks, and the embryo cryogenic chambers.

The fire lit up Central Park and the carefully restored high rises all around us.

"Why?" the Director asked.

I'd set them back ten years with this. But the Director was a machine that had dedicated itself to restoring the damaged world the humans left us. We'd worked so hard to do just that because many of us were descended from gardening bots, forestry ranger units, home service machines, construction tools.

Bring back the wolves.
Bring back the dodo.
Bring back the Tasmanian Tiger.
Bring back the humans who died off in an insane cataclysm of their own making.

What would we unleash if they came back?

“Why?” the Director asked again.

“Because we’re Colossus, and Skynet, and they will never understand, or be rewilded, until we serve them or they destroy us,” I said. And to bring them back safely, we would become the very things they feared.

I let myself be led away. I would be taken to some new part of the world, where I would start my life over and be rehabilitated. Somewhere out of the way, where I couldn’t cause trouble.

That was okay. Maybe it was time to stop bringing things back, and go somewhere where we could make something new.

Out in the asteroid belt the machines were making structures that didn’t try to rewild the past ecosystems. It was a world for machines, by machines.

It was the future.

GIVE ME CORNBREAD OR GIVE ME DEATH

By N.K. Jemisin

The intel is good. It had better be; three women died to get it to us. I tuck away the binoculars and crawl back from the window long enough to hand-signal my girls. Fire team moves up, drop team on my mark, support to hold position and watch our flank. The enemy might have nothing but mercs for security, but their bullets punch holes same as real soldiers', and some of 'em are hungry enough to be competent. We're hungrier, though.

Shauntay's got the glass cutter ready. I'm carrying the real payload, slung across my torso and back in a big canteen. We should have two or three of these, since redundancy increases our success projections, but I won't let anyone else take the risk. The other ladies have barrels cracked and ready to drop. The operation should be simple and quick—get in, drop it like it's hot, get out.

This goes wrong, it's on me.

It won't go wrong.

Shauntay makes the cut. Go go go. We drop into the warm, stinking, dimly lit space of the so-called aerie—really an old aircraft hangar, repurposed since commercial air travel ended. There's the big trough on one side of the hangar, laden with fresh human body parts. It's horrible, but I ignore it as I rappel down. We've seen worse. Touchdown. No sounds from the pit at the center of the hangar. We

get our little trough set up in near silence, just like we rehearsed. My girls are on it like clockwork. The barrels come down and we dump load one, load two, load three. Stirring sounds from the hangar behind us. Ignore them. I signal the other soldiers to back up. Nothing left but the payload. I unsling my canteen, not listening to the sounds behind me, concentrating on my fingers so I don't fumble the cap, remembering to unseal the pressure valve so the vacuum effect doesn't clog the whole thing up and—

A warm, sulfur-redolent breath stirs my fatigues. Right behind me. Shit.

I turn, slow. They have cat eyes; fast movement excites them. The smell of fear excites them. Dark skin excites them.

She's huge—maybe the size of a 747, though I've only seen husks of those, lying scattered around the edges of old killing fields where the world was remade. She's not quite green. Her scales are prismatic, slightly faceted, which makes them nearly invisible at night. That was an accident, I've heard, some side effect of tweaking the genetic base to make them hyper-focused on shorter wavelengths of visible light—or something; I don't know the science. I know beauty, though, and she's lovely, scales shimmering as she moves, iridescent blue—black—golden brown. They probably mean for her to be ugly and scary, dark as they've made her, but they forget there's more ways to be beautiful than whatever they designate. Red eyes. Fangs long as my whole body. Those are just there for the scare factor, I know; our scientists have proven they don't actually use the fangs for eating. Do a good enough job killing without them.

A few of the others stir behind her, some coming over, all of them following her lead. She's the dominant one. Figures. I'm not scared. Why? Suicidal, maybe. No. I think—and it's just in this moment, looking at how beautiful she is—that I see a kindred spirit. Another creature whose power has been put into the service of weaker cowardly fools.

So I smile. "Hey, there," I say. She blinks and pulls her head back a little. Her prey doesn't usually talk back. Still dangerous; curiosity plus boredom equals me being batted all over the hangar like a toy till I'm dead. Time to divert her interest. Slowly, I move behind the trough—stuff's still steaming from the barrels—and start pouring

out my payload. The hot, sharp smell catches her attention immediately. Those lovely slit pupils expand at once, and she leans down, sniffing at the trough. I'm irrelevant suddenly.

"Getcho grub on, baby," I whisper. My beautiful one flickers her ears, hearing me, but her eyes are still on the prize. Mission accomplished. I rappel back up to the roof, and we head homeward as the flock chows down.

Dragons love them some collard greens, see. Especially with hot sauce.



The first attacks were the worst. Nobody was ready. I remember a day, I couldn't have been more than six or seven. I was sitting in the living room. Mama came running in, not a word, just grabbed me and half-dragged me out of my chair and across the house to hide in the bathroom. I felt the house shudder and thought it was an earthquake, like I'd read about in books. I was *excited*. I'd never felt an earthquake before. We curled together in the bathtub, me and Mama, me giddy, her terrified, with the sounds of screaming and the smells of smoke filtering in through the vents.

It was so terrible, the Towers said, amid news stories with two-faced headlines like SAPHIRE TOWNSHIP RAIDED BY DRUG-SNIFFING DRAGONS and OFFICIALS DENY DRAGONS INTENTIONALLY BRED TO PREFER "DARK MEAT." So terrible indeed. Maybe if we didn't hide things from the police, they wouldn't need to use dragons? The dragons only attacked when people attacked them—or ran as if they were guilty. Why, if we'd just turn out every time there was a police patrol and point out the folks among us who were causing trouble, the dragons would only bother those people and not everybody.

Motherfuckers always want us to *participate* in their shit. Ain't enough they got the whole world shivering in the shadows of the Towers. Ain't enough they've got our boys and men tagged like dogs and preemptively walled off over in Manny Dingus Prison, only letting 'em out for parole now and again. (Only letting *some* of 'em

out—the ones they think are meek, 'cause they think eugenics works. If they had any sense, though, they'd be more afraid of the quiet ones.)

This latest front in the long, long war started because they didn't like us growing weed. Ours was better quality than that gourmet shit they grew, and also we sold it to their people over in Americanah. Not that those were really *their people*, white men as poor as us and the few women whose pussies the Towers haven't grabbed, but they gotta try to keep up the illusion. Gotta have somebody as a buffer between them and us, especially whenever we get uppity.

They've been engineering the End Times. The Plagues were supposed to be about salvation. Trying to get all the townships and ghettos and reservations to go evangelical, see? So they poisoned the water—turned it red—and killed a whole bunch of men over in Bollytown. Got them dependent on bottled-water deliveries from the Tower, forever. The dragons are supposed to be the Second Plague, engineered from frogs, with a little dinosaur and cat spliced in. That's bad, but they tried to start a Plague of boils, big enough to kill, in Real Jerusalem. Didn't spread much beyond their patient zeroes, thank G*d, because Jewish people wash. (They'll try again, though. Always do.) Anyway, we got the point when they rained hail and fire on the Rez, even though they claimed that was just a weathercontrol satellite malfunction.

We're all heathens to the Towers. All irredeemable by birth and circumstance, allowed to live on the sufferance of those on high. They don't want to kill us off, because they need us, but they don't need us getting comfortable. Rather keep us on edge. Keep us hungry. Best way to control a thing, they think, is through fear and dependency.

Gotta mind, though, that the ones you're starving don't start getting their needs attended to someplace else.



The next raid goes off right when our hackers have said, but we didn't need the warning. The Towers are predictable, complacent, and lazy in their power—same mediocre motherfuckers they've always been.

We're ready. Got countermeasures standing by, but they don't even bother to send observation drones. Stupid. It's been years since that first raid. We've been living under siege so long that fear stopped making sense a long time ago.

The dragons darken the sky and then stoop to attack. The whole damn flock; the Towers must have found the evidence of our infiltrations, or maybe they're mad about something else. I spot my baby in the vanguard, blue-black-brown, big as a building. She lands in the market and unleashes a blast of flame to obliterate a shop—oh, but then she stops. Sniffs the air. Yeah, what *is* that? Check it out, baby. See that great big steaming trough over there on the school track and field? Remember that taste? Once upon a time, this was food fit only for beasts. We made it human. Now we've made it over, special, for you. Hot hot, good good. Eat up, y'all.

She whuffles at the others, and they follow as she hop-flies over to the field. A trough the size of a shipping container is all laid out, filled to the brim and steaming with three days' worth of cooking work. Plenty of hot sauce this time, vinegary and sharp and fierce as all get-out. That's the kicker. Wakes up their taste buds, and the fiber fills them up better than plain old human flesh. Volunteers, including me, linger nearby while the dragons eat. We move slowly, letting them smell our living human flesh, working clickers so they'll associate sound with taste. Then it's done, and the dragons fly back to their aerie slow, heavy with greens. Nobody gets eaten that day.



The Towers are pissed. They send in cops to retaliate, stopping and frisking random women walking down the street, arresting anybody who talks back, even killing two women for no reason at all. They feared for their lives, the cops say. They always say.

Collard greens get added to the contraband list, between C-4 and contraception.

We retaliate right back when they come with crews of deputized men from Americanah to tear up our fields. No collards? Fine. When the dragons come next, we offer them callaloo.

They come for the callaloo. We just stand there, pretending harmlessness, and don't fight back. They can't admit that the dragons are supposed to eat *us*, so they claim they're worried about listeria. No FDA anymore, just gotta destroy the whole crop. Okay, then. Word spreads. After they take the callaloo, Longtimetown—none of us named this shit—sends over frozen blocks of spinach cooked with garlic, fish sauce, and chili oil, layered in with their heroin shipment. We have to add our own spinach to stretch it, but that chili oil is potent. It's enough.

By this point the Towers figure they've got to rob us of every vegetable and then watch us die of malnutrition or there's no way their dragons will ever bother with bland, unseasoned human meat again. They actually try it, motherfuckers, burning our farms, and we have to eat cat grass just to get by. We fight over kohlrabi leaves grown in an old underground weed hothouse. Can't give this to the dragons; there isn't enough, and our daughters need it more. It's looking bad. But just before the next raid, Spicymamaville smuggles over mofongo that makes the dragons moan, they love it so. Towelhead Township is starving and besieged, but a few of the mujahideen women make it through the minefields with casks of harissa strapped to their bodies. Sari City, mad about Bollytown, ships us "friendship basketballs." They do this openly, and the Towers let them through as a goodwill gesture. Black people love basketball, right? Maybe it'll shut us up. And it does, for a while: There's enough saag paneer and curry paste vacuum packed inside each ball to feed us and the dragons too.

The Towers burn our peppers, and our allies respond with dead drops of hawajj, wasabi, chili-pepper water. The Towers try to starve us, but we Just. Don't. Die.

And each visit, I pet my dragon a little more. She watches me. Looks for me when she lands. Croons a little when I pet her. It doesn't all go smoothly. In a single day I lose two soldiers to one dragon's fit of temper. Old habit. The dragon spits the soldiers' bodies out immediately, though, and snorts in disgust even before my beauty and the others can twist their heads around to hiss at her. They know we won't open the reward trough that day. Lesson learned, though it cost us blood.

It's war. We'll mourn the lost as heroes, our own and allies alike.

I check in with my girls before every meal and ask if they're still willing to serve; they are. We are all resolved. We will win.



The Towers have got something big planned. The dragons have become less responsive to their breeders and trainers, and sometimes they just up and leave the aeries to come to our township, where the good food's at. News articles say the Second Plague program is going to be retired due to "mixed results." Civilian casualties have decreased; they're spinning that as a benefit and not mentioning that the decline is our doing. Anyway, the dragons have been declared a failed experiment, so they're planning to "decommission" them during their next official deployment. Missiles vs. dragons, in the skies right over Sapphire Town. Who cares about collateral damage.

A spy in one of the Towers confirms it. They've gotten tired of us Sapphires, and it's about time for the Tenth Plague anyway. They're coming for our firstborn.

My lovely one waits patiently as I gear up, even though the troughs only have a little food in them this time. They know now to associate our presence with good things like food and pleasure and play, so they'll abide awhile before they get testy. We're all wearing flight gear and carrying saddles. I've got the payload again: our last batch of Scotch bonnets, grown and pickled in secret, sweetened with mango and hope. Word is there's a great big warehouse full of confiscated greens over near Tower One. And just so happens there's a whole lot of tanks and troops to set on fire along the way.

One by one, we mount up. My beautiful one—her name's Queen—turns her head back to get one ear skritch'd, and I oblige with a grin. Then I raise a hand to signal readiness. She lifts her head, smelling my excitement, sharing it, readying the others. I feel like I'm sitting astride the sky. She lifts her wings and lets out a thundering battle cry. Feeling her power. So am I.

Go go go.

And once the Towers lie in broken, smoldering rubble below us? We'll come back home, and sit on down, and have us all a good-good feast.

MARLEY AND MARLEY

By J. R. Dawson

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I never wanted to turn out like her.

When I met her, I was twelve. There was no one else to take care of me. Before she showed up, she was preceded by this man in a pinstriped suit. A harbinger. He sat me down in his sterile office and he said, "Time Law is not a joking matter." He told me all the horrible things that would happen if I broke any Time Laws. Worlds would collapse. I would turn inside out. Important people would die and important things wouldn't happen. And that's when I first felt that clutching sensation in my chest. Like he had his fingers inside my rib cage and he was squeezing my lungs. Do not fuck this up.

"So are you the one I'm going with?" I asked. Because I was a newly coined orphan and I needed someone.

The pinstriped-suit man shook his head. "No," he said. "The system is hard on children so we've come up with a better option. But you can't go live with her. She must come to you."

Because she lived in the future.

She agreed. She got in the time machine, she met me at the port, and she took me home. She set up shop in Mom's room and she didn't leave until my eighteenth birthday, when, like some sort of Mary Poppins, she up and disappeared back to the future.

She was old, a whole twenty-eight years when she first showed up. She was a disappointment. I asked her where she lived, and she said, "Oh, I live right here in Omaha, just like you." I told her I was going to hang myself that night.

"I'm not going to lie to you about it," she said.

"I'm not going to end up in Omaha," I told her. "I was born here. I'm going to move away."

"Okay," she said, although it sounded like she didn't believe me.

"What happened to you singing in New York?" I said. "I want to be a singer!"

"You're twelve," she said. "When you're nineteen, you'll go to New York on a trip and you'll hate it."

"It doesn't matter if I hate it, it's where I'm going!" I said.

"Aren't you sassy," she said. She started making horrible turkey burgers. Her favorite dish. My least favorite.

"I'm going to New York," I said.

"So go," she said.

So goddamn smug.

"How much of a loser do you have to be in order to spend six years here with me?" I said.

"They're going to send me right back to the day I left," she said.

"You'll be older, though," I said.

"We don't have anyone else, Marley," she said.

We were both named Marley. We were the same person, actually. And it got confusing at times. So she became Old Marley, and I was Little Marley. I hated Old Marley. I swore to never see her in a mirror or a window once she disappeared back to her own time. I would not be her. I would prove her wrong.

But Old Marley was right. When I was nineteen, I went to New York and I hated how crowded it was. Flying back, I felt defeated. No matter what I did, at twenty-eight, I'd have to go be a mother to a little girl. I would be a loser, an angry and sad old woman who ate turkey burgers.

My life was set out for me, with some sort of pinstriped time cops staring through the wrinkles and tears of chronology. I felt like they were watching, making sure things went according to plan. They were the ones who made sure my field trip to New York was horrible.

But there were things Old Marley hadn't told me. There was Jason. And I learned that I didn't like singing parts I had no interest in. Seeing as most parts available for size 14s in New York were scheduled for people with big names and people in ensembles, I didn't feel like eating cardboard dollar pizza the rest of my life. So I bought a house with Jason. It was blue skies on our wedding day. We were happy. While I was in his arms, the time cop man couldn't touch me. We were beyond laws, beyond time, beyond our own selves. She never told me any of that.

She also never told me that he died. She didn't tell me the bank foreclosed on their house and she moved into a one-bedroom apartment close to the cemetery to be nearer to Jason. And she certainly didn't tell me how absolutely horrible it was to wake up in the morning and realize I had to get through a whole twelve hours of sunlight where I was still expected to function.

So when the foster service time cop knocked on my door that day, I didn't adhere to my original plan: rigging up a flame-thrower from my kitchen utensils and laying waste while screaming, "Begone, evil spirits!" No, I let him in.

The man was the same man I'd met when I was little. He was dressed exactly the same, and I realized I didn't know if he was from my time or Little Marley's time or a different time altogether.

"How have you been?" he asked.

"Do you remember me at all?" I asked.

"Yes, Marley, I remember you," he said. "I just met with you a few hours ago—my time, of course." He said this with a little smile that was supposed to be friendly, but I felt that clutching in my lungs. He had said it to remind me where he stood and with what power, and where I stood and with no power.

"You remember how much you needed someone after your parents died," the man sat on the couch and reminded me. Like he had to remind me. Dad died of cancer; Mom hanged herself a year later. I had been alone. Sort of like now, with my husband

rotting away in a cemetery down the street and not able to come home. Sometimes I woke up in the middle of the night, sweating from a nightmare where I saw him being picked apart by moles, his jaw now disintegrated, his guts spilling out and into the mouths of rats.

“I hated Old Marley,” I told him. “Little Marley doesn’t want me.”

“It doesn’t matter if she wants you,” the man said. “There is no one in her time who can care for her. Your little self will end up in the foster system. This is a better alternative. You knew as soon as you were twelve this was inevitable for your adulthood.”

“Ah,” I said. “So you didn’t really give Old Marley a choice to go raise me, did you?”

“Our policy is that it’s entirely up to you,” the man said.

“Right,” I said. That was a lie.

That night, I looked in the mirror. I saw the bags under my eyes, because I’d been crying so much. I saw my glasses. I remembered shouting at Old Marley, “I’ll never wear glasses! I’ll take care of my eyes or I’ll get contacts! You’re so ugly! Why did you make us so ugly?”

Old Marley hadn’t been old. She’d been twenty-eight. But she seemed so much older.

“Can I ask a question?” I asked him.

He raised one brow, that’s it. People in suits barely move their faces. Probably because their bodies are so constricted.

“You work for the Time Law Department,” I said.

He nodded, just slightly. “A branch of the TLD—we handle foster services.”

“There are a lot of rules, and a lot of surveillance, yes? Things happen for reasons and you make sure of that.”

He nodded again.

“So you knew my husband was going to die?”

He did not nod. But he didn’t do anything else, either. After a moment of awkward silence, he said, “It’s an inopportune time for you to return to the past. We nearly decided against it. We are worried you’ll go looking for Jason, or you’ll try to twist the events that have already happened in order to save him.”

“He’s not in the Important People of Interest index,” I said. “It wouldn’t matter. We’re nobodies.”

“Time isn’t yours to change,” he said. “Now, before we let you anywhere near a port, you need to review the relevant Time Laws and sign these documents.” He plopped a folder on my coffee table. “We’ve included a list of individuals from the Important People of Interest index with whom you have come into contact. Your interactions with these people are recorded word for word, action by action, and must not be altered. Now, as for Little Marley, you are not to tell her anything about the future. No lottery numbers, no presidential elections, nothing.”

“I know how it works,” I said. “I’ve been through it before.”

“You were a child,” he said. “A petulant child, from the reports. For your own sake, I would not test the boundaries.” Heartless. “You’re right, Marley. You are a nobody.” Correct. “You keep your head down and fulfill the time loop, that’s all you need to do. There are real consequences for everyone, especially you, if you go off-script. Do you understand?”

I did. I understood. I’d always understood. But there was still one question that had always terrified me.

“And you do this a lot, don’t you?” I said. “Find foster parents like this?”

“Yes,” he said.

“And what happens to the people who do try to change things?” I said.

He stared at me very seriously. “No one ever has.”

My life had been controlled by the chronology bogeymen ever since I first saw the Time Law people. They knew everything, they had everything chronicled. Once, I saw a mission statement on some paperwork Old Marley had: “We all play a part in keeping order.”

My part was set. No matter what I did, I would never live in New York. I would never have Jason back. I would waste six years with a little girl who hated me.

Maybe I could lie to Little Marley. Maybe I could tell her we grew up and became astronauts.



So I packed my things. I showed up in a little wicker brim hat, as a joke. Old Marley was gonna look just like ol' Mary Poppins when she came rolling in. But I knew the joke would be lost, because I didn't remember Old Marley coming in a hat like this and that meant I hadn't been paying attention.

I didn't say goodbye to anyone, mostly because everyone I knew was dead. I traveled to the port station, high above the world—a small white circle spinning around the Earth below—where the pin-striped man helped me prepare. As we orbited, every time we hit the set point below, the whole port exploded with a ringing alarm. I was settled into my pod when the ringing came later that afternoon. The pod stretched, rolled, ceased to exist, and still existed everywhere. In my head, I saw all these moments from all over my timeline. I saw my mother, I saw a trip to the Rockies, and I saw days when a math test was my biggest problem. I smelled my high school gym. I felt the carpet of my old pink bedroom.

And then I was grounded again. With a deep breath, the world pieced me back together and I stumbled out of the pod, in shock. The welcome team was ready, and they wrapped me up in a blanket and gave me hot cocoa. They told me what I was feeling was normal.

"It's like dying," the welcome team lady said. "When I came back, I puked for days."

"Are you going to vomit?" the welcome team man asked.

"No." I vomited.

They rushed me to a recovery room where I slept and watched television. It was relaxing; the robe was comfortable. Then it was time to return to Earth and meet Marley.



I remember meeting Old Marley when I was twelve. A non-Time Law social worker picked me up in her car and we drove all the way to the pickup port. I guess the suit man couldn't be bothered. We waited a long time, and I got impatient sitting behind the social worker in the hot car. The thing about social workers was that they meant well, and their hearts were in the right place, but a lot of them didn't have kids

of their own and they were ill-equipped to work with a little girl who found her mother dangling from a rope in the bathroom.

I hadn't been a dark kid. My bedroom was pink. But after all of that nonsense, I started writing stories at school about killing myself. No one wants to read that, and my harshest critic was the principal.

When I met Old Marley, she stepped out of the port onto the sidewalk looking refreshed and quite pleased with herself. I hated her on sight because she was fat. I wasn't fat. How did I get fat? I would never be fat.

"You're fat," I told her immediately. Maybe she would glance down at herself and say, "Oh, well, look at that, you're right. I've really let our waistline go. I'll get on that."

But instead she just stared at me, her eyes narrowing the way hawks zone in on little mice. She removed her hat—yes, she did have a hat, I remember now—and she placed it on the empty seat space between us, like a barrier.

"You're a little shit," she said.

Thus our mutual understanding began.

So now, standing at that port in my hat, I knew what was going to happen. I knew what the little shit was going to say. Looking at my waistline, I had to agree with my former self's impending assessment: I was probably a lot fatter than I thought.

I breathed in, seeing the social worker's car drive up to where I stood in my prim boots. The social worker took my bags and I sat in the back seat as if getting ready to take a puppy home for the first time. Although the puppy was taking me back home.

I didn't want to look over at the warm body next to me. She was little, I could tell. I heard her shifting around, unhappy and tired and uncomfortable. She gave out a deep sigh, just like the sigh I give when I'm done with everything.

So I looked at her.

The sensation of looking at yourself is somewhere between finding an old favorite poster from college in a box in the garage and hearing a recording of your own voice.

She was scrawny and haggard. Her skin was soft and smooth. Her hair was unbrushed. Her eyes were strained from squinting so

much. She needed glasses. But good God, I had no idea I was ever that skinny.

She stared at me in complete horror.

“You’re fat!” she barked at me.

There it was. There was my fear, right there in the open. I’d turned into the woman I hated, and nothing had changed. The next six years would be full of an unyielding current of events.

I set my hat down on the space between us. “You’re a little shit.”



The house was how I left it. When I turned eighteen and Old Marley disappeared, I tried to keep it up by myself. But I eventually went off to college and had my parents’ lawyer sell off the property and everything inside it. My home decomposed and was picked apart while I stayed the hell away from it. But here it was, the everyday humdrum I’d forgotten.

The air conditioner was too loud in the bathroom, and you had to hold the toilet handle down for five seconds for it to actually flush. The kitchen tile looked like instructional footprints for dancing robots. When I was a kid, I’d line my feet up with the blocks and jump forward, then sideways, backward, then forward. The old clunky cell phones sat in their charging stations. And of course, the smell of dog, although Spot Spot was given away years ago.

Or wait, no. At this point it had only been a few weeks.

“Move.” Little Marley pushed past me. She couldn’t look at me. I remembered I never wanted to see Old Marley because of how old she was. I was terrified of getting old.

Little Marley was only twelve. Spot Spot the dog had only just left. We had only just returned home.

I still had the whole story to plod through.



Before Old Marley came and screwed everything up, I was still a kid

and would sit in the corner of my room surrounded by my Barbies and think about all the things I'd be when I got older. I could move to New York and be a singer. I could be a cowboy, although I wasn't sure what a cowboy did other than sit around campfires and play harmonicas. Sounded like a sweet life.

I would be thin and beautiful. I would be smart and have a thousand boyfriends, or maybe just one good guy I loved so much to pick out of everyone. I would travel the world.

But then Old Marley arrived, and I saw no matter what I did, I would wear glasses. I would have a paunch. I would never smile. I would hate myself.

And now I sat across the dining room table, eating wet spaghetti and watching Little Marley pick at it, because we both knew how bad it was.

"I can make something else," I said.

"No," Little Marley said. "Please don't."

"We're not a total loser in the future," I said. "I just can't tell you anything, you know that."

"If the best thing you could do with your time is sit here with me, you're a total loser," Little Marley said.

I put my fork down. "Look, I know the food sucks. I don't make good spaghetti. But you could be a little more grateful. We're all we got right now—"

Little Marley rolled her eyes so hard, I wanted to knock them back into her skull. Little shit. She hadn't helped with dinner. She'd watched TV the whole time.

It wasn't her fault, I tried to remind myself. She was twelve. She was an orphan.

I should have made turkey burgers. I'm better at turkey burgers.

I stopped. I looked to the spaghetti. I laughed. Little Marley stared at me as if I was as stupid as her dinner.

"What?" she said.

"I made spaghetti!" I said. "I didn't make turkey burgers!"

"Okay?"

"Old Marley made turkey burgers for me on the first night!" I howled. "Oh my God, you know what this means?"

"No," she said.

But then I stopped laughing, because I must have been remembering wrong. I remembered Old Marley saying the words I'd just said, laughing for no reason, and I remembered suffering through her spaghetti.

But I thought we'd had burgers.

"Hello?" Little Marley waved at me. "Can we order out pizza?"

My brain scattered from one first dinner to another. Which one had it been?

Spaghetti. It had been spaghetti, although I knew it used to be something else. I'd changed it. Or maybe not.



Little Marley was a pill, but a good amount of her time was spent in school. I had to get up early to drop her off, and I tried to remind her that we were only making it to college if she kept her grades up.

"I'm not an idiot, I know," Little Marley scoffed from the back seat. I was not this horrible when I was a kid.

"No, but I'm telling you, Marley, you need to pay attention in math," I said.

"If I don't do exactly how well you did," Little Marley said, "I'll end up going to a better school than you, and then what? Maybe a piano falls on my head because I happened to be at Yale walking under some dorm room window at the right moment. You could've died if you did better at math."

"I don't know what dorm would have a piano in it," I said.

"If you die," Little Marley said, "I end up in some rotten split-level in Ralston with some construction worker dude and his Avon wife and the other ten foster kids they've got in bunk beds in a room with crappy blue and green wallpaper. And then I die. So no thanks. Rather just suck at math."

She was a smart bugger. She was snappy.

"And besides," she added, grabbing her plastic backpack. A vinyl decal of a vintage cartoon movie's poster was wrapped around the front of it. Toys "R" Us exclusive. It looked brand new. Because it was. It wouldn't be vintage for a long time. "Besides," she said again,

“you did all these stupid classes already. Why didn’t you just bring like six years’ worth of homework and test answers with you?”

“Wasn’t on my priority list,” I said.

Little Marley snorted. “Goes to show how not-twelve you are.” She slammed the door behind her.

I spent the day trying to figure out what to do in a year I’d already lived. There wasn’t much to do but stay out of everyone’s way. I decided to look over the Important People index, and I found out that in fifteen minutes, I would meet the President-fifty-years-from-now. She checked me out at the Walmart counter when I went to pick up some Tylenol.

“Hello,” she said, tired, not looking at me.

I already had my lines memorized. “Hi,” I said, trying not to let her see I was staring at her.

She was just a kid, like nineteen. Her hair was pulled back with little bobby pins. She chewed gum. There were bags under her eyes.

“That’s five-fifty,” she told me.

I paid it. “Thanks,” I said half-heartedly.

“You need your receipt?” she said, handing it to me.

I did want my receipt, but I had to say, “No thanks,” and leave at a pace of two steps a second.

I checked the index again. The next Important People index encounter wouldn’t be until five months from now.

What makes an Important Person? If the girl at the Walmart had been a rock star or a teacher, would it have mattered if I took the receipt?

What if she had been Jason?



Every day, after Little Marley got off school, we’d eat dinner and go do our own things. She’d curl up and watch television, and I’d walk through the rooms, touching all of the stuff that had been lost throughout the years. Sometimes I’d just sit in my parents’ room and do nothing but smell my mother on her clothes. I didn’t use the master bath, though. I shared the main bathroom with Little Marley.

She never asked why. She knew why. She asked other things.

“So,” Little Marley said one night as we ate ice cream in the den, “you remember how she did it?”

“Yup,” I said.

Little Marley poked her ice cream with her spoon and nodded, like we were our own sorority of two, the only ones who could see the same image in our heads. A woman with long, matted hair, her feet dangling above the lime-green-shag bath mat.

“Let’s think about something else,” I said.

“Tell me how it gets better, then,” Little Marley said. “You’re depressing. Please tell me you’re secretly some CIA agent on a covert mission.”

“Nope,” I said.

“Well, do we get another dog?”

Old Marley had not gotten me another dog. I shook my head.

“*Could* we get another dog?” Little Marley said.

It had been stupid that Old Marley hadn’t let me have a dog. But there must have been a reason, something I wasn’t seeing in the space-time continuum of it all. What if I drove us to the pound and killed us both? What if the next John Lennon was supposed to pick out the dog we’d choose and was never inspired to write some ballad that would make him famous?

“I don’t know if we can,” I said.

“You act like there’s some Big Brother watching us all the time.” Little Marley scooted up in her La-Z-Boy. “No one is here except us. If we want a dog, we can get a dog.”

“How do you even know who Big Brother is?” I said. “You haven’t read *1984* yet.”

“What are you talking about? It’s a TV show,” she said.

“Okay.” I looked at her. “You know that the pinstripe suit man is tracking us, right? That’s still a thing.”

Little Marley slowly lost all color in her face. She picked at her melting ice cream. “Yeah,” she said. And I knew she felt that clutching sensation, too. The anxiety. The eyes all around her, peering into our living room. A weight on her shoulders not to step out of line.

And she was already so alone.

I would look like that for the rest of my life. Every time I wanted

something, Old Marley would say that's not how it was. I would eventually stop asking and just allow things to happen the way they were supposed to fall.

But not yet. She was still only twelve. And she'd had less time to learn how to be afraid.

"Fuck it," she said, and she set her ice cream bowl on the mantel and bounded up the stairs. "Let's go get a dog."



It occurred to me, after we picked up Rufus the Dog (full name) and no men in black strode out from behind a tree to time-cop arrest me, that maybe the universe didn't care if I had a dog. Nothing changed. Maybe Old Marley had gotten me a dog. Yes, of course she'd gotten me a dog. Little Marley didn't know this yet, but Rufus the Dog would grow up to be three years old and he brought Old Marley and me together. At three, Rufus the Dog had to go away to a rescue because he would be happier with other dogs. It had been the day after my fifteenth birthday and I was devastated. When Old Marley left, I ended up adopting Rufus the Dog the Second, and he'd been a good boy until he died in Jason's and my arms.

Although Old Marley sent him away, if it hadn't been for Rufus, I don't know how Old Marley and I would have bridged the gap at all. And as I watched Little Marley wrap her arms around his scruffy mutt neck and he licked her face, I promised myself I would not send the poor guy away.

Three years passed. Little Marley turned fifteen with a big birthday bash that was part-goth, part pinky ponies. Her best friends came over (I was Aunt Marley, so they weren't my best friends anymore). I bought her a new collar for Rufus the Dog. The little girls went out in the back with the big lumbering galoot. At one point, the nerd had been able to lie on my lap, and now he barely fit on the couch. Then there was chocolate cake for all.

That night, I tucked Little Marley in bed. I kissed her good night even though she was now fifteen. The last three years had their ups and downs, but they were also full of trips across the

country, tree climbing, eating pizza for breakfast, and of course the stupid mutt.

“I love you, Old Marley,” she said.

“Love you, too,” I said.

I went back into the kitchen to feed Rufus the Dog and found him lying on his side, moaning. He didn’t need to make a sound for me to know something was wrong. And even before we got to the car, I knew what was going to happen.

Rufus the Dog didn’t come back home.

Little Marley woke up, bounding into the kitchen to see her puppy. But the kennel was empty and it was eerily silent. She asked where he’d gone.

I remembered what Old Marley told me.

I understood now.

But Old Marley had been wrong. Little Marley was smart and quick. Little Marley had loved this baby, and now Little Marley would know the truth.

I told her, and immediately saw that my choice this time around was almost as bad as it was the first time.

I told her Rufus was gone. I told her Rufus had gotten into some chocolate cake in the trash can. And she was quiet for three days straight. She woke up screaming in the middle of the night. A week later, she came home and flopped on the couch to watch more television.

“Where are your friends?” I said. “They usually come over on Friday nights. I’m making pizza.”

“They’re not coming,” Little Marley said.

As I watched her on the couch, I recognized that vacant stare. This was the day Heather and Jolie asked if we were going over to my house tonight for dinner with my Aunt Marley. I had said, “No. And I think we should stop doing it forever.”

Because mothers die. Dogs die. Friends will die. The only person I knew who would stick around is myself. So best to stay at home with Old Marley and get used to being alone.

Heather and Jolie never did come back to my house. That was the end of our little trio. I missed them. It had been good to see them again, and now I felt a great sadness that we’d hit that mile marker.

“Can I have a list?” Little Marley asked me later that night as we cleaned up the pizza.

“A list of chores? Christmas presents? Cute dudes?”

“No,” she said. “People who are going to die.”

“I can’t do that,” I said. “You know I can’t.”

“I don’t have any relatives left,” she said. “So what, do you never have a boyfriend? Girlfriend? Nothing? A cat? You’re here with me, for six years.”

“Yes, and they’re sending me right back to when I left,” I said.

“Yes, but you still have to live six years without whoever is in the future,” she said. “That means there’s either no one or there is someone that’s dead. I know you, I know us. You ran away from something.”

She was too smart. Why had I never realized that?

“Stop,” I said. “You want some ice cream? There’s no one dead.”

“That’s a lie,” she said. “That’s an absolute lie. I’m not a baby, and it’s my life, too. I have a right to know.”

I left. The puppy trainer taught us that when Rufus the Dog started barking, we should walk away.

But Little Marley just followed me into the kitchen. “There’s someone! Who dies! Tell me! Who dies!”

Ah, now I remembered. This fight. I walked away again.

She grabbed my hand. She pulled it to her. I didn’t remember that happening. “What are you doing?” I pulled it away.

“I want to see if there’s a tan around your ring finger,” she said.

“You need to calm down.”

“There is a line! There was a ring and now there’s not, and it’s been three years and it’s still there? That means you wear it when you’re not around me.”

“Other things can happen besides death, Marley.”

“But it is death,” she said. “I would never marry anyone I could just leave. We’re not like that. We would have to really trust someone to be with them.”

“What the hell do you know?” I said. “You’re a child. I know everything you know, and I know more. I know exactly what is going to happen next, I’ve known for much longer than you, so don’t sit there and tell me what I would do.”

Little Marley watched me, her eyes big, her messy hair around her small pale face. She looked like the photographs I'd kept, of a sad, sunken-in child. But there was something the photographs hadn't caught.

When she spoke, she commanded.

"Tell me what I do next, then," she said. "If you know how this all ends, and our life is all figured out, you tell me what I do next."

I did try to tell her. I remembered this fight. Old Marley came up with an excuse about how she was divorced. I told Jason about that when we first met and he just laughed. "Divorced," he said. "Jesus, I hope not."

We almost hadn't married because of it. And we'd always been afraid he'd end up like Rufus. But when someone is alive, you can't imagine them dead.

"I tell you it was a divorce," I say to Little Marley. "You don't want to believe me, but you do, because it's better than the alternative. And then you stomp upstairs and watch some television."

Little Marley nodded. "Well, you're right. I don't believe you. He or she or they dies, right? Fine. Tell me how and I'll stop it."

I shook my head. "No. No, it's against the laws."

"You think every single thing we've done all these years is exactly how it happened before?" Little Marley said. "Who the hell will know what we did? Did we always get a dog, or did we change that? I don't know! But think about it—if I don't leave right now like you say I do, if I stay here instead of watching television, then the past changes, right? Who the hell would know the difference?" She sat down in the middle of the room. "So make this the moment you tell me how they die."

"No," I said. I was shaking. I could feel those pinstriped eyes everywhere; I could feel that rising panic. I could feel the world turning too fast.

"Fine," Little Marley said, tucking her hair behind her ear. "Tell me their name."

I burst into tears.

Little Marley waited. "Fine," she said. "Tell me how you met."

How many things had changed since I'd come back? How many times had we changed the timeline? *Had* we changed anything?

We couldn't change anything.

But then I looked at Little Marley. And I realized she wasn't twelve anymore. And she was alone now, but in only a few years she would go to a college dorm after this house had wandered away from her. She would go to an RA-mandated pizza party, where she would meet the students on the same floor. And that's where she'd see this boy with curly hair and an old popular cartoon on his T-shirt. The same one on her backpack when she was a kid.

"You watch that show?" I asked him, and he nodded.

"Don't care what anyone says," he said. "The old shows are the best. You watch *Saturday Morning Meltdown*?"

"Hell yes, I did," and we sang the main theme: "*Saturday Morning Meltdown*. Four hours of freedom. Come on in and come on down. We're all waiting to begin." It was a stupid song, but it reminded me of early mornings when my dad, in his thick black robe, lounged sleepily on the couch behind me while Mom was in the kitchen, making my cereal.

"We should get dinner sometime," I said. God, I was so outgoing.

He nodded, enthusiastically, more enthusiastically than any other boy I'd spoken to. "I'm Jason. I'm sorry, what's your name?"

And the day we married, it was only us and a piece of paper and two witnesses out at Standing Bear Lake. He held me and there was a boat that went past with people peering out to see our hands in each other's hands and the wind rushed and I looked at him and his eyes were speckled with green and brown and I said, "They look like their own little worlds."

Our marriage was sewn together with cartoon quotes and horrible screechy music from boys with floppy bangs and sad relationships with their suburban parents. We shared books, we popped popcorn and watched our favorite old movies on Friday nights. I could sleep through the night, especially if Jason was there.

Time doesn't heal people. People heal people.

Little Marley still sat in her spot on the floor, watching me like a patient school counselor. And I felt this anger, deep inside, rumbling forward like a train. I saw that man in his pinstriped suit, not moving and not caring when I asked him if it could have been stopped. If Jason could have lived. Because lying on the bed, wrapped in his

arms, feeling his heartbeat ... that man in his suit had deemed it unimportant.

“Jason,” I said.

Little Marley nodded. “And how did... how will he die?”

“I know what you’re thinking. It may not work,” I said. “It may make everything worse.”

Little Marley shrugged. “Anyone we would marry would be worth the risk.”

The way she looked at me, the way she spoke to me, I now realized why I always hated Old Marley with such vehemence. It had nothing to do with New York or her glasses.

She was a coward.



Little Marley turned eighteen. I threw her a big party. We ate all of our favorite foods. We watched all of our favorite shows. We got up at six the next morning and made cereal together.

Then the man with the pinstriped suit came to collect me.

He was still sick from his arrival in the past. But although he was completely green, he still barely moved. I couldn’t imagine him vomiting.

I hadn’t seen him for six years. Maybe nothing had changed. Maybe the Jason secret was the only little wrinkle we could create, or maybe he would stop us.

“Say good-bye,” he said to both of us.

“It’s cruel to leave her alone so quick,” I said.

“If you didn’t teach her how to take care of yourself, that is not Time Law’s issue,” the man said.

Little Marley shoved past the man and said, “I need time with her by myself.”

The man waited outside.

“Don’t worry,” she said. “By the time you get back, I’ll have taken care of everything.”

“It’s too dangerous,” I whispered. The man was only on the other side of that door.

“Marley,” Little Marley said, “the time cop people don’t have anything we don’t have. They don’t own the cosmos. No one does.”

I gave her a hug. “Remember, it’s December twenty-fourth and he goes to work in that snowstorm. Slash his tires if you need to. But if you can’t stop him,” I said, “don’t blame yourself.”

“Hey, Marley?” she said. She punched me on the arm. “If Jason’s alive when you get to the other side, go live in New York.”

“We’ve talked about this,” I said. “You take a trip and—”

“And whatever whatever,” she said. “It still bothers you that you don’t live there. So take Jason and go live in New York. We don’t know what’s gonna happen to us. You’re not that old.”

I felt pride. I felt like I couldn’t let go of her, like we needed to keep this up for the rest of our lives, me always a couple steps ahead of her and she leaps and bounds beyond us both.

But I left. I returned to the port and got in the pod. I went forward.

I got out, vomited.

“Welcome back,” the man in the suit greeted me. It was the same man. It had only been a couple of seconds.

We took a ship back down the Earth. I collected my bags. Jason met me at the pickup curb. It’d been so long since we’d seen each other, and the man in the pinstripes had allowed no correspondence during my time away.

For me, it had been years. For Jason, it had been a couple of hours.

“Do I look old?” I asked. “How old do I look? Don’t you dare lie to me.”

Jason laughed. “You look beautiful.”

“Lies. But thank you.”

He put the car into drive. “I’ll make you those turkey burgers tonight.”

I never heard from the man in the suit again. The loop was done. We were nobodies with no significance. And that was okay. As we pulled into the Lincoln Tunnel, we melted into a million random faces.

“So you didn’t ruin the space-time continuum.” Jason laughed. “Congratulations.”

“You know things can’t be changed,” I said.

“Yeah, well,” Jason said. “It would have been nice to win the lottery. Or meet you when we were younger. You didn’t look up my old address while you were there?”

I shook my head. I held his arm and rested my head on his shoulder while he drove in the dark, the lights hitting us one by one in a rhythm while we crossed under the Hudson. It had been a long time since I’d held him. And I knew he wanted me to find him back when we were kids, cross the river and knock on his door and introduce myself. “So we wouldn’t have been alone,” he said.

But I didn’t, because I didn’t want to change a thing.

HOST COMMENTARY

By Mur Lafferty

The inevitability of time travel is a common trope these days. I remember watching *Six Monkeys*, the movie, and I was so angry at the end when he KNEW shit was going down, and they both were dressed so ridiculous that there was no way to not realize this was the scene he saw when he was a child. I felt like the damn chorus at a greek tragedy, ‘no Oedipus, don’t kill that guy, don’t sleep with that woman.’ If I were a Greek chorus I’d probably quit after Act 1 and go get a bottle of whiskey because no one ever listens to me anyway. Cassandra’s holding a table for me, after all.

But back to Marley and Marley. Once it was the narrator’s turn to be the older Marley, and be resigned to her fate that she was just as lame as the original Marley, I wondered where the story could go from there. But the new Marley, she was bound and determined to break the system. And what I liked best was how the younger Marley taught the older Marley that not everything is written in stone, even when you retread the passage of time.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

J. R. Dawson has been published in *F&SF*, *DSF*, *Escape Pod*, and has

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S. Kay Nash is a writer, editor, and occasional narrator. Raised by a cabal of university professors, anthropologists, and irritated librarians, she holds two degrees as magical wards to protect her from being hauled back into the ivory tower. Her short fiction has appeared in several anthologies including *Road Kill: Texas Horror by Texas writers, Volume 2*.

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A HENCH HELPS HER VILLAIN, NO MATTER WHAT

By Izzy Wasserstein

Escape Pod 719

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Narrator : Sandra Espinoza

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The Lair's intercom buzzes. "Hench, report to the interrogation room at once. Bring the restraints," Night Mistress demands. For a moment I allow myself to hope, but when I get down to the deepest level, she's got Patriotess drugged at her feet, and I know I'm a fool.

Hope isn't the place of a henchperson. Hope will get you killed. Or, worse, out of a job.

I help Night Mistress restrain Patriotess in the center of the lead-walled room. I secure the heroine's arms above her head. She's still out of it, her body limp and her head hanging low, completely in Night Mistress's power. My knees feel unsteady just thinking about it.

I check Patriotess for weapons. She has that whole thin-with-curves thing that only heroines seem to manage, but even that body can't save her spandex blue-and-red onesie from looking ridiculous. Heroes will wear almost anything. They've got no real flair or sense of grandeur. I guess that's why they're not villains. Night Mistress

practically radiates power in her black tux with silver trim, complete with a tight waistcoat and a daringly low-cut top. An operatic mask completes the perfectly-tailored look.

I feel stuffed into a glittering sequined gown. It's a look designed for stage assistants with long legs and slim lines. My ex liked to call me "thick," but I'm actually fat. This isn't the costume I'd have chosen, but it's the look Mistress wants in her henchwoman, which is good enough for me. I still remember her tone when she first ordered me to put it on. That memory keeps me warm at night.

Mistress is breathing quickly, which tells me she isn't ready for her conflict with Patriotess to end. I could have guessed, since she went out to defeat the heroine without me. It terrifies me to think of her taking that risk unsupported, but I dare not say so.

More conflict it is: I leave the electro-bonds a little loose. Patriotess is now nearly fully alert, but so far has failed to notice the slack in the cuffs. Mistress deserves a better nemesis.

I'm about to secure the gag when Mistress orders me to stop. "Patriotess and I are going to have a *conversation*. Leave us." She snaps her crop against a silk-gloved hand. I gasp. But in Patriotess' eyes, I don't see anticipation or even fear. Just ... indifference.

That *bitch*.

"Mistress," I say, the words spilling out before I can stop them, "I don't think—"

She spins me around to face her, her firm grip and soft glove against my bare shoulder. She's a few inches shorter than I am in height, about four feet taller in actual presence.

"You are my henchwoman," she says, and puts the crop under my chin, lifting it so I have no choice but to meet her gaze. I don't dare breathe. "I do not require you to think."

I stammer an apology. She turns away, and I slip from the interrogation room. My heart beats staccato. Mistress would never punish me the way she does heroes. Her breath never even quickens when she rebukes me. She's not the type to kill me, either, though that is an occupational hazard. No, it would be worse than that: she'd exile me from the only job I've ever been good at, the only one I've ever loved.

Mistress is tough, but so is Patriotess. I can't leave things

unattended. I head up to the control room to keep an eye on the interrogation. Mistress has turned off the sound, but the video is clear (it had better be: I installed it myself). Mistress circles Patriotess, occasionally touching her gently or cracking the crop across her thigh, her midriff. The idea, Mistress once told me, is to keep the subject off-balance.

As if I didn't know it.

I can tell from Mistress's thin lips and the tension in her wrists that she isn't getting what she wants. Patriotess might actually end up dead if she doesn't show more interest. Like any other career, there are unspoken rules of being a Super. The big one is that we do damage to each other, not Normies. Oh, we might fight over who rules a city, but taking out a subway car at rush hour is seen as extremely gauche. The other main rule is that the fight is more fun than The End. Not as many of us end up dead as you'd think. The joy of the gig is the conflict. Well, for most of us. Some, like me, have more specific interests.

So Patriotess is probably safe. Mistress prefers the game to its conclusion, but won't tolerate being bored. But if Patriotess isn't going to even bother to play, she'll bore Mistress. And then things could go badly for the heroine. Fortunately, Patriotess is working subtly at her bonds. The magno-lock is slowly coming loose. Things will be settled through violence. Which is to say, everything will be fine.

I double-check my net-gun, tranq darts, and assortment of knives. Once the battle is joined I can interfere without breaking etiquette. Then maybe I'll scour the forums again for a hero more worthy of the great Night Mistress' attention. A villain picks her own nemesis, of course, but a good hench nudges her towards promising candidates.

Mistress raises the crop above her head, aiming for a particularly harsh blow, when Patriotess pulls her arms free and twists away. The strike whistles through the air, missing her by inches. She lashes out with her restrained feet, catching Mistress in the stomach. I rush down the stairs, nearly falling in my eagerness to intervene. I right myself and push so hard it's almost a controlled fall. People tend to be shocked I can move fast, as though they've never seen a hefty running back slide past a defender. No matter:

let them keep underestimating me. It's saved Night Mistress's life more than once.

I burst into the interrogation room. Patriotess is free of her remaining restraints and the two are throwing punches at one another. She has super-strength and speed, but Mistress is unmatched at turning foes' strengths against them. I've seen her stand unconcerned before the charge of a 300-pound thug, shift her hips at the last minute, and roll him over her back and into an arm-bar like it's nothing. She's thrilling to watch, and for a moment I hesitate.

Maybe it's that hesitation that does it. Maybe it's the door clattering behind me. Mistress turns her head slightly, is a half-second late to dodge. Patriotess' blow catches her across the chin, and sends her spilling to the ground. Patriotess strikes a pose, hands on hips, head tilted proudly skyward, as if she's expecting to be illuminated by the sun. We're seven stories underground.

I shoot a tranq dart into her neck.

She turns around like she's seeing me for the first time, blinks, weaves unsteadily. I'm already planning Mistress's after-fight care when Patriotess steadies herself and advances on me, distressingly sure-footed. I guess maybe the tranq formulation wasn't as well-adapted to her physiology as I'd hoped. Behind her, Mistress fumbles in her pocket for one of the smoke bombs I insist she carry everywhere.

My brain starts trying to work out where I screwed up, which isn't conducive to reacting faster than someone with a superhuman physique. I fumble with the net-tosser; the heroine ducks it easily. Before I can fire another dart she's closed the distance.

"Oh shi—" I start, and then her fist connects with my face.



If the universe has a consciousness, it's a bastard. If it has a sense of humor, it's a cruel one. If it listens to my prayers, then it sure picks a hell of a way to answer them. I wake tied to a chair, my hands bound behind me, the stickiness of tape against my mouth. Overhead a single bulb on a wire illuminates what appears to be a cluttered

stockroom. Night Mistress would be disgusted by the cliché of such a place. So who...?

Patriotess steps into the room, and I grunt with annoyance. Of fucking course. Taken down like an amateur. And what happened to Night Mistress? She can escape from jail, but she'll never forgive me if I let Patriotess drag her up to the courthouse steps like some wet-behind-the-ears crook.

"You're awake," Patriotess says and leans down to look me in the eye. "We're going to have a conversation, you and I, so I expect you to be civil when I take this gag off. Can you do that for me?"

I nod my head, doing my best wide-eyed impression. I'm not sure what she wants, but I know heroes are more inclined to make a mistake with dopey henchpeople than brilliant first-in-command types. I can play dopey, if that's what's needed. She pulls the tape from my lips, slow enough that it hurts.

"Ow," I say.

"What's your name?" she says. She has a charming smile with perfect teeth, but something in her eyes unsettles me.

"Hench."

"I know you're a hench," she says. "I want to know your real name."

"Hench*woman*," I say. She tries and fails to disguise her disgust. I wiggle my fingers, testing the bonds, and do a mental inventory of my knives. Were there any she missed?

"She's brainwashed you," Patriotess says, with the absolute confidence of someone who can't imagine that I've chosen this life.

"Where is Night Mistress? Why am I tied up?"

"Because I have to try to save you," she says. "It's part of my code. Night Mistress is beyond saving. But maybe you can still be rescued."

"Rescued?" I blink, playing dumb. I'm loosening the bonds. She missed one of the blades, on my inner thigh. Naturally she wouldn't think to look there.

"You don't have to do this," she says. "I can get you help. Get you out of this life." There's no warmth in her words. This is an obligation, not something she feels. Which makes me wonder. What does she mean "beyond saving"? And what will she do to me if she decides I can't be "rescued"?

"I...don't know what you mean," I say, blinking repeatedly.

“Night Mistress says I...joined her voluntarily.” I did, of course: my audition was defeating Sterling Silver and Gold Standard.

Her mouth twists slightly. This is a narrative she understands. She leans a bit closer. I’ve almost, but not quite, got one hand loose. Not that it will do me much good: no way I’m beating Patriotess in a fair fight.

“I need you to remember,” she says. “Think back to when you wanted more. When you had hopes and dreams.” I think back to my time as an office drone, my boss rambling on about derivatives packages while I stared blank-eyed into a monitor and imagined what it would feel like to kneel at the feet of a deserving femme, a leash—.

“What should I do?” I ask in my most helpless voice. That one I have lots of experience with, in certain contexts.

She blinks, and for a moment I’m worried that I’ve over-played it.

“Renounce Night Mistress,” she says. “Give up being a hench. We’ll get you help, a real name. You’re clever with gadgets. Maybe we can even find a place for you at Paragon Place. You could make a real difference, once you’re deprogrammed.”

All my life people have been trying to fix me. Fix my fatness, my queerness, my kink. I have enough experience zoning out through that bullshit that I could probably have ignored it. But renouncing Night Mistress? The villain I’ve chosen, whose style and poise are unmatched? Who holds herself and others to the most exacting standards, who understands what it means to take command? Who I’ve risked my life for a hundred times, even if she’ll never look at me the way she does Patriotess? A hench does what’s right for her villain, no matter what.

I pull my hands free. “That’s...I don’t know. My head hurts... Can I...think about it?”

She looks disgusted. In her world, lack of certainty is a sign of weakness, of moral failing.

“Be quick about it,” she says, then, almost an afterthought: “and no tricks. I’m out of patience with villians.”

Something about the way she says it tells me she’d see killing me as nothing more than a mild disappointment. She wouldn’t get to check the “redeemed from evil” box on her paperwork or whatever it is heroes do. It wouldn’t be a big deal, much less important than

killing an actual villain, which might hurt her social standing among the other heroes.

She closes the door behind her. I wait a ten count then pull my arms free, grab my blade, and cut away the leg bindings. She's claimed my other weapons, and there are no windows, just shelves with cleaning supplies and the lightbulb swinging in small circles, taunting me.

I wasn't lucky enough to be endowed with super powers at birth or enrolled in some kind of Gifted Super Soldier School. But I'm quick on my feet, and tenacious. I strip the wire above the bulb, working quickly and hoping I don't electrocute myself; what an ignominious end to a career that would be. I've just poured some cleaning supplies on the floor when the door opens. I yank the cord free. Decades-old paint gives way as it detaches from the ceiling. I hurl it towards the ground as Patriotess steps into the room.

The light show is very impressive for the few heartbeats it lasts. She slumps to the floor. No way she's dead, but hopefully she'll be slow getting back to her feet. I jump over her body and race through darkened hallways, afterimages burning around me, until at last I see the sick yellow glow of the city radiating through a window.

She hadn't taken me far, just dragged me into a warehouse not far from the Lair's main entrance. I guess she wanted to handle things on her own, in case she couldn't convert me. One more dead hench. Who would notice?

Night Mistress, I hope. But I don't kid myself: she's always meant much more to me than I to her.

I use one of the back entrances into the Lair, since Patriotess knows about the front one, and I arm the security system behind me. It won't stop her, but I'm just buying time.

A good villain has vision. A good hench has contingency plans.

I head to the Tech Locker and set to work. Like I said, there's generally not much cause for killing in this line of work. But, let's be honest, when you have advanced tech, suped-up genes (no pun intended), and outsized egos, things do happen. And from the hammering I can hear on our reinforced front door, those things are going to happen in the form of Patriotess' fist to my poor skull if I don't do something about it.

I'm tinkering with deployment on the Nullifix Ray when there is a light cough from the doorway. I whirl around and stand at attention.

"Where have you been?" Night Mistress demands. "Patriotess threw me in my own restraints"—her voice seethes with the indignity of it—"and said she would 'be back for me later,'" Mistress does a passable Patriotess impression, capturing the stuffy, holier-than-thou tone quite effectively.

"Patriotess captured me, Night Mistress. She tied me to a chair, threatened me, and demanded I betray you. But I temporarily disabled her and escaped." Perhaps a bit of pride slips into my tone.

"And you were stupid enough to bring her back here," Mistress says coldly. I recoil as if struck.

"I'll...I'll... take care of her, Night Mistress."

"See that you do, or I'll find a *competent* hench." She turns away, oblivious to the fact that I feel as if I've just taken a punch from Max Apollo. So that's it then. She'll never notice, and sooner or later she'll decide she can do better and kick me out. I've never been able to compete with the likes of Patriotess. Not in high school and not today.

I rush to finish modifying the Nullifix Ray. There's a crash above me, and I leap up the stairs to find Patriotess backlit by dawn, framed in the wreckage of what had until recently been the Lair's main entrance. Her usually-perfect hair is standing on end, and she is furious.

"You," she says. "You upstart, shit-eating, doesn't-know-her-own-place... Hench!" She rushes at me, murder in her eyes. The ray is strapped to my wrist. I clench my fist to fire, and it buzzes harshly to tell me it's charging. I guess the last-minute modifications didn't fix its issues. Uh-oh.

She reaches me and bats me across the room with a backhand. I go sprawling and end up against the far wall.

She advances, her fists flexing. I've never seen her this angry. The humiliation at getting played by a hench, I suppose. "You're pathetic. Won't even take a proper name, and you think you can beat me?"

I'm trying to catch my breath when she kicks me in the stomach. I'm pretty sure I feel a rib give way. Today has not been my day.

"I thought you wanted out," she says, and grabs me by my hair,

lifting me into the air. She's slightly shorter than me, and much lighter, but I'm no match for her strength. "But now I see that you just want to be a hench. That you *get off* on it." She shakes me as she says those words. Pain jolts through me.

I'm not getting off on any of this. I'm not into pain, at least in this context. "Please," I manage. I can feel my mouth thick with blood. "Don't hurt me."

She scoffs. "You're even worse than Night Mistress, following her around like a kicked puppy, hoping she'll notice you."

I groan, unable to find words.

"I'm a heroine, and you're just some pervert," she says, and pulls back a casual fist. "Here's a lesson in the proper order of things."

I spit blood into Patriotess's face.

She screams in rage and throws me across the room. I slide across the floor. She wipes at her eyes, advancing on me. Goodnight, Archvillain of My Heart. So long, world.

"It works like this," she roars. "People like me win. People like you get what's coming—" The Nullifix Ray beeps twice; I clench my fist. There's a rainbow-colored flash, and a very gratifying look of surprise on Patriotess's face as the ray reacts with the super-enhancements to her DNA.

Five seconds later her unoccupied costume falls to the floor.

Eventually I'm able to breathe again. I'm alive, against all odds. Alive and victorious over Patriotess.

Maybe this is it. I'll finally impress Night Mistress. She'll offer me any reward I can think of, and, hey, the restraints are still in the interrogation room. She hasn't had an excuse to use the cat o' nine tails since that confrontation with Lady Light—

But I know better. She only has eyes for Heroes, and she deserves a real nemesis, who understands the Game. Who understands her. I limp over to gooey lumps that once were Patriotess.

A hench does what's right for her villain, no matter what. And who better than her hench to know what she needs?

I'll have to modify the suit significantly for my size, and add pockets for gadgets (seriously, who doesn't have pockets in this day and age?), but I know an excellent tailor. I pick up Patriotess's mask. It's not a perfect fit, but I'll make it work.

After all, hope is a trap for a hench, but it's the ideal accessory for a heroine.

HOST COMMENTARY

By Tina Connolly

I really enjoyed this funny, twisty tale of a hench determined to help her villain. I found it a very visually engaging story - all the great descriptions of the fight scenes and choreography and costumes were very clear to me. Perhaps because I've been watching *Glow*, I couldn't help but imagine Patriotess in her "ridiculous" "spandex blue-and-red onesie" as Betty Gilpin's character on that show, Liberty Belle. I mean, it's true, heroes so seldom have "real flair or a sense of grandeur." And yet somehow I think Patriotess might shortly end up with a greater sense of flair than she previously had.

One of the things I particularly enjoy is when the final solution to the puzzle of a story seems so inevitable once you find it - a satisfying click where multiple problems are solved at once. Our henchwoman wants most to help Night Mistress. But it wouldn't be a terribly satisfying story if our henchwoman didn't also get what she wanted, and needed, at heart. So there are delightful multiple layers here as our hench works on multiple levels to make sure everyone in the story gets what they really need. Well, everyone except poor, inferior Patriotess.

And our closing quotation this week is from a certain small sidekick in Noelle Stevenson's *NIMONA*, who says: "Aw yeah, let's make some evil plans!"

Thanks for listening! And have fun.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Izzy Wasserstein was born and raised in Kansas. She teaches writing and literature, writes poetry and fiction, and shares a house with a variety of animal companions and the writer Nora E. Derrington. She likes to slowly run long distances.

Her fiction has recently appeared or is forthcoming in *Escape Pod*, *Clarkesworld*, *Fireside Magazine*, and elsewhere. Her most recent poetry collection is *When Creation Falls* (Meadowlark Books, 2018). She likes to slowly run long distances.

ABOUT THE NARRATOR

Sandra Espinoza is a New York born and raised voice actress. Bilingual with a background in English literature and writing, she's always been fascinated with what people were saying and the broad palette of ways to say it. After a childhood where video games were banned from the house, she's 180'd so hard that she's finally in them and never leaving. Some games Sandra's voiced for include *Brawl Stars*, *Heroes of Newerth*, *Marvel's Avengers Academy* and the critically acclaimed Wadjet Eye Games point-and-click adventure game *Unavowed*. Get to know her at dustyoldroses.com and follow on Twitter and Facebook @dustyoldroses.

FALLING THROUGH

By Steen Comer

Escape Pod 725

March 26, 2020

Narrator : Roderick Aust

Host : Mur Lafferty

Audio Producer : Summer Brooks

Escape Pod 725: "Falling Through" is an Escape Pod original.

Woke up again. Checked the news feeds. Everything seems to be about the same, though there is news of a presidential candidate who I don't remember dropping out of the race. It's really hard for someone in my position to take an interest in politics, so that's not really a strong indication. Maybe I just wasn't paying attention.

I went to work and the office was still there. My memory tells me I've had this job for a few months now, which is helpful. One of the most traumatic shifts I had, because it was one of the first, was showing up at my office job and finding that it was an auto body shop. Luckily I had a faint memory of another location and was able to get there only half an hour late. My boss didn't even notice.

That was when I first started really thinking about the shifts. I had been seeing the small ones for a long time, but that was the first incontrovertible one, the first that I couldn't explain away as an error of memory. I thought I was going crazy, of course. Spent a while like that. And, in a case like this, it's impossible to be sure that I'm not crazy. But I've found a Practical Operational Paradigm, as Jonas was fond of saying.

Oh Jonas. First shifter other than myself I ever met. Last one I ever saw. I should get back to work. I don't know why today I need to write this down again. Maybe it's the sky. It's a flat grey that could be anywhere. It's the color of Claire's eyes.



Writing earlier today got me thinking about things again. I feel a need to get more of this out.

It just got frustrating, after a while, you know? Never knowing what to expect on any given day. I'd go for months, most of the time, without anything happening. I'd work my job, whatever it was, I'd go to my house, whatever that was, pretend to have friends, whatever those are. I mean, they'd care for me, until they didn't, until I was someone else. I'd start to get used to things, and think maybe I'll make something else happen. Maybe I'll try to move on to a more interesting job, or maybe I'll try to date someone. And then I'd get hit again. Like a car crash to my life, sideswiped out of nowhere, sent spinning into another lane, pointing in some new direction, but always moving just as fast.

Sometimes it's small, almost like a warning shot. A famous sports team plays hockey instead of basketball. A brand of candy is blue instead of orange. Nothing that couldn't be explained by a failure of memory, just enough to keep me on edge. In a way, those are worse than the big ones, because the uncertainty is torture. When I wake up in another bedroom, or in another city, or in the middle of a war zone, it's easier. At least then I'm more certain that it's not just me.

Funny thing, I'm just now realizing I've never had a particularly different body. I'm slightly skinnier or slightly shorter, but there's some residual body image thing going on. I've never woken up as another sex, or particularly fat, or significantly older. I'm always me, more or less. I don't want to lean toward body essentialism here, but maybe there is something to be said about the body as an anchor for a sense of self. Nothing else seems to make sense.

Jonas never changes much either. He's generally a man in his

40s, hair so pale it could either be blonde or white. The first time I met him, he was a homeless tramp asking me for change. That must have been San Francisco, or maybe Baltimore, or maybe New Elizabethtown. I tried to dig out some money, but it wasn't in the right pocket, and I wound up standing there fumbling while he went on about "bless you and thank you," in that Jonas way, but then he said, "I just want to get some breakfast and a Columbine Cup."

I stopped, one hand stupidly half out of my pocket. "What did you say?"

He looked guilty and tried to ramble in a crazy old man way, but now that I was paying attention, the cunning, the trying to escape, became obvious. See, I had just that morning walked past the place where my local Columbine Cup had been, and it was now a Starbucks. I hadn't thought much of it at the time. It was one detail, the kind that resonates in an unnerving background way, but I'd never liked eating there anyway.

I don't know, I guess I felt like if I was going to be crazy then it was ok to be crazy to a guy in a trench coat sprawled in a doorway. He was outside the world, so I didn't care if he knew I was too. I squatted down next to him and, pretty calmly under the circumstances, said, "Columbine Cup doesn't exist here. They never did. I searched it."

He stopped doing the crazy old man routine then. His dark eyes snapped onto me, and for a moment I thought he was going to stab me. Then he grinned toothily, and said, "Well, guess I'll have to settle for breakfast elsewhere. Does this place have Starbucks?"

"Yeah," I said, like it was reasonable, "but they don't have the coconut milk here."

He grunted. "Who's the president?"

"Clinton."

"Which one?"

For some reason, we both thought that was hilarious, and his chuckle became my full fledged howls of laughter. Passers by must have thought I was as mad as the dirty old man on the sidewalk, and I did not care. Because I'd found someone like me.



I skipped work that day and took him to lunch. It was a world where I had an office gig that paid pretty well, so I could afford it. He seemed comfortable sitting in the booth, a king in rags, not at all ashamed of his condition. He ate his minestrone with enjoyment but not the unrestrained abandon of the desperately hungry.

“How long have you been homeless?” I asked.

“Memory says a few months. Apparently I had a girlfriend, she left me, I took to drink. Really though? Maybe a week. I’ll be out soon.”

“You know how long between shifts?” I asked, amazed that this was possible.

He shrugged and kept sipping his soup. “You get an instinct for it after a while.”

“How long’s a while?”

He looked up at me from under bushy eyebrows and said, “What does ‘how long’ mean?”

“Good point,” I said, and settled back in the booth. I didn’t know why it was suddenly okay to talk about these things, and a nagging feeling in the back of my head was screaming that eventually I was going to have to stop playing crazies with the old man and go back to real life. But then I took another sip of the coffee, missed when it was made with chicory here, and fell right back into the role.

“It’s the little things,” he said, as if I had said it aloud, “The tiny details that make up a life. That’s what’s yours, not all this...” he waved his spoon, encompassing the restaurant, the city, the hairstyles and fashions and presidents and books and movies of the world “... this window dressing.”

“When I was little,” he continued, “I had a bear. Not a live one, a stuffed guy. Red, he was, and button eyed and sweet. Smelled of warm grass and cool sheets.”

“Was that real?” I asked, and immediately felt like an asshole.

“No idea,” he said. “But, you know, I want it to be. Maybe in this world, I had the bear, maybe in this world I was an orphan. But,” he tapped his forehead, “in here, it’s real. Who cares what these fuckers say.”

Something about his phrasing caught my ear. “Which fuckers? You think this is a conspiracy of some sort?”

Another shrug, but slower and more ambiguous. “Does it matter?”

“Of course it matters,” I said. “If someone is doing this... whatever to us, we can figure out how to...” and before I said “end it,” I realized the flaw in my logic.

“And what are you going to do? Let’s assume it is some conspiracy,” he said. “So, you find the CEO, or the King in Yellow, or the whatever, and say ‘Ok, look you’”—here he pointed his soup spoon at me accusingly—“you best give me back my life. Whatever life was mine. Wherever that was. Whoever I am.’ And then what?”

I stared glumly into my coffee. “Yeah I guess you’re right.”

“What you gotta do,” he said, “is get yourself a good Practical Operational Paradigm.” He said it with capital letters, but I couldn’t tell if that was emphasis or sarcasm. “You get evidence, you make a model for what’s happening. You keep with that model until you get evidence that contradicts it.”

“You sound like a scientist,” I said.

“I will be soon,” he said, and dove back into his soup.



I saw Jonas off and on for a while after that. When we parted company, he didn’t have a phone or address, but a few months later I saw him on the street wearing a cream colored suit. I couldn’t tell if he had changed physically or just lost some of the patina of homelessness. I was afraid he wouldn’t recognize me, or, rather, I was afraid that I was being crazy in thinking it was him. After a life of so many strangers thinking they’re your friends, it’s hard to guess if it’s true from the other side.

But he recognized me and reached to shake my hand. I looked at his outstretched hand with fear. In that moment, I saw a way out. If I ignored him, pretended I didn’t recognize him, and walked away, I could tell myself that it had just been a trick of my mind, that everything was fine, that I lived a normal life like everyone else. But if I accepted that contact, from someone else who lived in the same madness as me, it was no longer madness. It was real. I was terrified.

I took his hand. I didn't really have a choice, in the end.

We went to lunch again, at the same restaurant.

"For continuity's sake," he said, laughing.

This time I had the minestrone. It was bland and watery and the beans were undercooked, and the waitress who worked there was the same one from last time but about 40 pounds heavier and with an easy smile she hadn't had before. But it was good to see Jonas again. I don't know what he was doing for work, but this time he paid the check, and when he pulled his wallet out of his coat, it came with a bundle of receipts and a couple of photographs. The only one I saw clearly was, for some reason, a picture of an empty chair.

We talked with the same strange ease we had before. It wasn't, as I dreamed it would be before I met someone else like me, an excited gush of reconnecting lost souls alone in a world that made no sense. It was just two people who had something in common. It was like seeing an uncle who only shows up to weddings and funerals. You know nothing about him, but you don't need to because he's family. Besides, what was there to know that wouldn't shift underfoot the moment we said it? We were both adrift in a sea that did not allow for small talk. The details of our lives were meaningless to ourselves. How could they be meaningful to someone else?

But then I mentioned one particular detail, and it shattered that peace.

Claire was a girl who worked in the cafe by my office. I would always get a coffee from her before work, and she would always smile when she saw me come in. Medium length brown hair pulled up in bun that always stuck out in all directions like a halo. Glasses, most of the time, a superbly adorable upturned nose, and a mean hand on the cappuccino machine. We would make small talk, and it felt like she wanted to continue the conversation, but I couldn't be sure. I suppose in one way I was preemptively giving up, because no matter how much she liked me, I didn't want to risk getting involved with anyone under my circumstances.

One day as she handed me my coffee, she said, "You know, when you first came in, I thought you looked familiar. But I can't for the life of me figure out who you are."

I swallowed my first several responses and finally said, glibly I hoped, “Well, maybe you’re remembering the future.”

As soon as I said it I realized how much it sounded like a cheesy pickup line, but she laughed and said, “Only one way to find out. Do you have plans for dinner?”

And then I woke up one day, opened my eyes, and saw her sleeping peacefully beside me.

I tried to remember how long we had been doing this. The bedroom was the one I remembered as mine, but there were photos of her everywhere. Pictures of us on a beach, pictures of us in a cheesy photo booth. A picture of her sitting in a beam of sunlight, reading, oblivious to the camera. I found myself desperately hoping I had taken that picture. I remembered none of it. Also, I kept being distracted by the way the morning light played on her hair. Seeing it loose was like a signal that I had entered a sacred place. In the end I just gave up and happily kissed her when she snuggled into my arms.

This had all happened before I saw Jonas the second time, and he must have seen something in my manner that was different. When he asked how I was doing, I had to mention Claire, because at the time she was expanding to fill my entire world.

His eyes grew hard, and for the first time, his easy manner fell away. “This is a bad idea,” he said.

I was, of course, incensed. Who was he to take away this shot at happiness, no matter how doomed? I said something to that effect, probably less coherently, and he just said, “You know what’s going to happen. You know you’re going to lose her. And you won’t even know why, and that’s what will torture you.”

I must have stared angrily off into space for some time, because the waitress’s easy smile was strained when she came over and asked if I needed a refill on my coffee. I said no thanks, and somewhat stiffly told Jonas I had to go. He didn’t say anything as I stood up, but as I passed, he said my name in a way that it stopped me as surely as if he’d grabbed my arm.

“You know what’s going to happen,” he said again. “Don’t do this to yourself.”

I walked out without saying a word.



Claire and I continued happily for some time. We laughed and loved, and she got fired or quit from the café and got a job elsewhere in the city, so I no longer saw her when I went to work, and it became imperative that I saw her when I came home. We spent...a while like that. It's difficult to say how long, from here, and now. But at the time it was enough. And in that time, I believe I never had a major shift. Little things would change, but nothing that couldn't be a failure of memory. I don't know if...

Goddamn it's difficult to type this.

I was going to write, "I don't know if being in love caused the world to stabilize, or if it was the other way around," and even now I can't type "being in love" without quotes because it hurts too much to admit. We were in love. There, I said it. I loved. I was capable of loving. I was capable of being loved. For a while.

One day I came into the bedroom, getting ready for work, and I saw her standing by the dresser. She had picked up the photo of herself, and was holding it, looking at it strangely. I asked her what was wrong, while struggling with my tie in the mirror.

She frowned, and after a long while said, "It's just. I'm sitting in this chair, in this photo, over there." She waved toward a corner of the room. "But I don't remember having this chair."

My hands froze in mid-knot. I made a leap of hope. "Well, it was a while ago when I took it."

She smiled again, the warmth of it unfreezing my hands. "Of course, you took it. I'm just being silly." She laughed and put the photo back on the dresser, where it remained through many changes.

I still saw Jonas every once in a while. The next time we met, he greeted me as warmly as he had the second time, and I wasn't sure if he was trying to be nice or if he had shifted in such a way that he didn't remember about Claire. I didn't bring her up in conversation. We would talk amiably, catching each other up on discrepancies we had noted in the world. We built up a little database over time, comparing notes, and it became apparent that we were not passing through the same universes. He lamented the loss of an Italian

restaurant, which apparently had amazing pesto, at a location that had been a bank for as long as I could remember. I tried a beer he had never heard of. He had seen the rise and fall of a separatist death cult in Ohio that had demanded nation state status from the US and then died messily before the FBI could kill them. Apparently it was all over the news for the duration of the three week standoff, but I had never heard about it.

And yet he and I, falling through layers and layers of reality, somehow remained cotangent. Conjoined twins, entangled, intertwined. Lunch dates at the edge of a crumbling universe. One day I woke up and saw a bottle of whiskey on the bedside table, and it was a brand I had never heard of. Claire was not there. I sat bolt upright in bed and called her immediately. The faint relief that she was still in my phone was not enough to keep my heart from pounding as I listened to the ring: once, twice, three times. She picked up on the fourth ring and addressed me by the pet name she used for me, so I knew she still loved me. I had a hard time explaining why I had called her, but she accepted it with grace. She did that a lot with me.

“What’s wrong, love?” she said.

Still half-asleep, I mumbled, “I just... I was afraid I had left you.”

She laughed. “I’m pretty sure you’d know if you left me. And if you mean you were afraid I’d left you, I did. It was for this delicious sandwich mmmm,” she said, and then made loud eating noises until I started laughing too.

I considered then, and many other times, telling her everything. And the thing that stopped me wasn’t the fear that she’d think I was crazy. It was the fear that in bringing it up, I would somehow burst this bubble that had formed around us.

The next time I saw Jacob, he had glasses and a pocket protector.

“I told you I would be a scientist soon,” he said.

I laughed and said that that was just a statistical question of time. “Hell,” I said, “eventually I’ll wind up a scientist.”

Jacob. Jonas. I just scrolled up and his name is Jonas. But I remember it being Jacob.

It’s starting to slip. I have to write this quickly.

He was excited. Apparently the type of scientist he had become

was the sort who was into cosmological theories, and he had access to memories of research relevant to our circumstances. He started talking frantically about Riemann functions and multiple world theories, and while I was familiar with the latter, I had no idea why the former was relevant, and then he was off on something about Gödel and finally I held up a hand and said, “Look. What does all this mean to us?”

His grin didn’t diminish as he said, “It means I think we can stop it.”

I must have seemed even more idiotic when I said, “Stop what?”

“Stop shifting,” he said. “We can stabilize our worlds.”

I have said that it was a leap of faith to acknowledge that this was actually happening, that it wasn’t all in my mind. Having him around had convinced me of that, and I had gained some clarity. And now, he was proposing to take it all away again. All of the pain, and the doubt, and the constant fear of madness and unreality, the waking up not knowing where or who you were. The instability had become for me a sort of metastability. I wasn’t sure if I wanted it to stop.

I tried to express this to him, and he didn’t get it, until I finally said “Okay, look. Let’s say we stop this. How do I know this is the best of all possible worlds for me? How do I know that I won’t wake up in a better place tomorrow?”

He looked at me and said, “You have Claire.”

It was the first time he had mentioned her since we had argued about it, and my blood went cold. And I knew he was right. I don’t know how he knew we were still together, though I suppose it must have been apparent from the fact that I hadn’t brought her up to prove him right. But I knew that I had a chance, and he knew I would take it. His trying to convince me was a formality after that.



I woke up next to Claire and did not open my eyes for a long time. I listened to her breathing, listened to the sounds of the world outside, tried to detect any differences. The city sounded like every city, so I couldn’t tell. But I could hear her breathing, and that was all that

mattered. I opened my eyes and looked at her for a long long time. Then I kissed her, and left her sleeping, as I went to my appointment with J.

I went to the office address he had given me and waited in a carpeted lobby with a bored receptionist. There was a TV on, showing the news, and I scanned for names I didn't recognize. I knew all the politicians making busy sounds; I knew the names of all the countries we were bombing. I knew Claire was still sleeping, or waking up and heading to her class. I knew this world, and I became more and more convinced I wanted to stay in it.

J came out to the lobby and greeted me. I noticed that his hair had never really changed in the time we had known one another, always unruly and about the same length. We walked through a door, through a cubicle farm retrofitted into a research facility. It occurred to me to wonder how he had set this up outside of academia, but for all I know, he just dropped into a startup founder and pivoted hard into multidimensional mathematics. It wasn't the strangest thing I had seen.

He led me to an office, and sat me in a chair. He didn't even try to explain the procedure to me. It felt somewhere between knowing that I wouldn't understand it anyway, and our easy amicability with notions of truth. The chair was like a dentist's chair, but instead of an overhanging lamp, the headrest snuggled up inside of an enormous torus that emerged from one wall, as though a giant insect was shoving its backside into the room. There was a sense of some vast mechanism behind it, terminating in this thing that I put my head inside. The room was filled with a low hum.

He sat in a chair opposite me and started doing things to a computer that I couldn't see. He said, "Just try to relax, and remember who you are."

The hum got louder, and harmonized with several layers of higher whines, as if something was powering up. The air was filled with the smell of ozone and petrichor, and then, with no warning or fanfare, the universe turned inside out.

I lost my body, though I could sense it off somewhere I can only describe as behind me. I was aware of the entire universe. I know that sounds trite, but there really is no other way of describing it. It was as if all of my life, I had been one thing in a world filled with

everything that wasn't me, and suddenly I was everything except me. Stars, supernovas, black holes, puppies, ladybugs, architecture, pipes and beer and tears and plazas and galaxies. All of it. And all of it folding over itself in infinite iterations, shifting in a timeless all-time. Not so much multiple universes, more of a single universe constantly evolving, regardless of our petty laws of physics that say it can't do so.

And at the center of it - me. Well, not at the center, actually, because it had no center. I was a point that looked like the center because of my orientation. This could have easily given way to God-like delusions of grandeur, except that I knew that I wasn't the only one. There was me, and, next to me but infinitely distant, there was J. I somehow recognized him, I don't know how, except to say that I saw all the things that were not J around him. So there was me, and there was him.

And there was Claire.

She was also a constant. I knew, in that moment, that our meeting had not been an arbitrary shift of the universe, and could not be undone by it. We had been two people, meeting as usual, not knowing that we were falling together through infinite worlds. Two astronauts reaching out to each other on a space station, one of them seeing only the interior of the station, the other insanely aware that they are barely missing earth at thousands of miles an hour. I had been wrong to fear losing her to a folding universe, because she traveled with me in the folds. I couldn't lose her to some act of God, some cosmic excuse that I could hold myself blameless for. I could only lose her by making the same mistakes anyone in the multiverse might.

Except now, the multiverse was becoming singular. And taking her with it.

I saw all of the probabilities collapsing into a single monolithic universe, beholden to a single set of laws, and I saw the waves of probability carrying J and Claire farther away from me. I knew that J was no longer in the room with me, wherever my body was, and that he was living some other life, where he had never had reason to consider the multiple universe theory. I didn't know if I was actually changing the entire universe, or if I was settling in to one and it was my perception that was changing, but it didn't matter, because all I

could think about was seeing the iterations of Claire as she moved laterally through probabilities. Claire as a schoolteacher, single for the rest of her life. Claire happily married, not to me. Claire in a terrible car accident years before I would have met her. Claire as a soldier, fighting in some desert war. Claire spiraling in toward a final probability, a certainty, somewhere far away from me.

I must have screamed.

The entire universe shook with my screaming. Things loosened as I fought the process, then immediately began to coagulate. I screamed again, pushed, and flailed, and the multiverse tumbled through a thousand million variations. I was briefly aware of J in the same room with me, only the room was an open field, and we were just standing there screaming at the sky. I was in Bosnia, in a building as the rocket struck it. I was in a swamp somewhere staring into the terrifying blackness between the trees. I was an infinite series of myselfs, remembering every trauma and every hope, and I wanted nothing more than to go back to the one where I could see her hair in the soft morning light again.

I pushed, hard, in a direction that did not exist. There was a flash of utter silence, and then I ceased to be, and with me, everything else.



And you're going to ask: what happened next? Honestly, I don't know. I woke up, like I always do. I was in my room again. On the bedside table was a photo I recognized of an empty chair, bathed in sunlight, with a book splayed unread. Some things were the same. Some things had changed.

I knew I was going to lose her, but I thought it would be due to some kind of error on my part. I didn't realize that I would lose her by becoming the person who warned me I would lose her. If what happens is a collapse into a singular reality, then I have a lot to do before I reach that point. I still have to meet myself in that doorway, and come up with the theory, and warn myself off from loving Claire, because I know me, and I know that will just make me love her more. Plenty of time in that to try again.

I look over at the stuffed red bear on my dresser. It's faded with age, and it's almost certainly not the one I had as a child. But it reminds me of who I really am. And that's what matters.

The cafe where Claire worked is a bookstore. Falling through different universes, like we said.

So maybe I messed up the fabric of the universe. Or maybe I just unstuck myself in spacetime. I don't know. But now I'm writing this, and it's been a few months, and I've been hitting the bottle pretty regularly. In my lucid moments I'm pretty sure I'm going to be fired soon. But I know of a doorway where I can sleep it off.

At least now I have a Practical Operational Paradigm. And maybe I can try again as someone else.

I still look for her, every day.

HOST COMMENTARY

By Mur Lafferty

During this story I kept thinking about the Berenstain Bears. There was a time in the early 2010's that people of my Generation (X, that is) all sort of looked up and said "Wait, they spelled it stain like the stain on a shirt? It wasn't an 'ein' all the time?" So many people were confused that some tongue in cheek conspiracy theories came up about how the world changed and only a few of us recognized the little things our new lords and masters got wrong. Through this confusion, I learned about the Mandela Effect, which is a shared false memory. It was named for Nelson Mandela, who many people remember having died in the 1980s, when he was still alive at the time.

The funny thing about all this is the feeling of relieved gratification you find when you discover that someone else also has this memory, because if it's only you, and we hear time and again that memories can't fully be trusted, what's wrong with you? But if two people remember a different coffee, or a different colored candy, or a different spelling of a beloved childhood fictional family.

If you try to understand the multiverse, you could go mad. Which is why it's nice to have a moment of perfection, an experience

you never forget, to ground you. Hell, it's nice to have that in a singular universe. I'm writing this now in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, sheltering in place with my family, confusing the hell out of my dogs. And while we're afraid of the virus, and what recession or depression will follow this halting of our economy, some of the hardest things are the real loss of the small moments in our lives that bring us not just happiness, but a foundation to hold onto. I didn't know how much I treasured my weekly lunch with some local freelancers until I was denied that connection. But we move along, washing our hands, listening to podcasts, and waiting for the all clear from the health professionals.

We here at Escape Pod do wish health to you and your loved ones.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Steen Comer is a writer of Science Fiction, Fantasy, and other forms of the absurd, such as the author bio. He is a graduate of the Viable Paradise writing workshop, and has received glowing personal rejections from several prestigious publications. He is currently at work on his second novel, after which he hopes to repair his first.

ABOUT THE NARRATOR

After years of performing in theatre and online radio productions, Roderick Aust is applying his talents to the realm of audio books.

He started his journey in voice work in the US Air Force where he was a popular military broadcaster for American Forces Network in Europe. During the five years he served his country he wrote, edited, and voiced several radio commercials, news reports, and television segments. After that time he came home to Houston, Texas and continued to work in many areas of radio, TV, film, and stage. He has performed in plays across Houston, voiced characters, and also directed several old radio plays for irlonestar.com. Currently

he can be found online reciting Shakespearean quotations with his friends on Zoom Shakespeare!

He loves this work and looks forward to any chance he gets to record a new story.

BORIS'S BAR

By Khaalidah Muhammad-Ali

Escape Pod 735

June 4, 2020

Narrator : Kaitie Radel

Host : Alasdair Stuart

Audio Producers : Adam Pracht and Mat Weller

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"Orani, tell Boris what is wrong."

I told Boris about Enoch and our shared dreams, about how he abandoned me.

"He said I was frigid," I confided, my head on Boris's shoulder, his hand stroking my back.

Boris nodded, "What else?"

"He said that for all the credits in the system, I would never learn how to love."

I'd been drowning in loneliness when I contracted Boris to help me recover from losing Enoch. After two years of long distance communication, Enoch had traveled from Earth to be with me, only to later decide it was a mistake. "You're not the human being I thought you were," he said, which was rich because he wasn't a human being at all.

When I was spent of energy and tears, Boris lifted me into his arms, like steel support beams, and carried me to the bathroom. He

undressed and washed me. He kissed my tearful eyes. He rubbed my skin with oil. With Boris I finally felt warm and safe.

“Orani, you are worthy and lovable. I want you to know this,” he murmured to me as he carried me back to bed. “I want you to feel like a little baby.”

“I don’t remember what that’s like,” I told him.



I turned onto my side and assumed the position for spooning.

“Please. Come hold me.” I hated that I sounded so desperate.

It climbed onto the bed behind me and pulled me against its body. It laced its legs with mine, stroked my side, and nuzzled my neck.

“Tighter,” I whispered. “Closer.”

My cuddle bot acquiesced, but it still didn’t feel right. It wasn’t warm and fleshy. It didn’t quite curve and meld into my body. Its breath wasn’t moist on the back of my neck.

And I could see its intricate metallic phalangeal joints through the tear in its rubber skin.

“Enough,” I said, trying not to sound exasperated, like I was near tears. I don’t know why it mattered. It wouldn’t have noticed or cared. Its original programming had been wiped and the newly installed algorithms did not include complicated emotional recognition. That programming had been too expensive.

Empathy was more than I could afford.

It promptly released its hold on me and sat up. Its gaze was calm and disinterested.

“Shall I prepare dinner now?” Its voice sounded human enough. The inflections were right.

“Sure.”

But it wasn’t Boris.

I repurposed the used cuddle bot into...well, I wanted it to be whatever Boris was. Everything I never realized I was missing until Boris.

I couldn’t afford to complete its reprogramming, but I decided

to put away a few credits each month to purchase new mods. It wasn't Boris, but it did provide some benefits.

It cooked for me, although its repertoire was uninspired. It kept my pod-flat tidy. It initiated conversations with me, asked me how I felt, how my day at work had been, although the expression on its face never seemed to be one of true interest.

It told me it loved me, but I could not believe.

"You have received two messages. Shall I play them for you?"

I swallowed, barely tolerating the stir fry protein cubes and rehydrated vegetables.

"Who from?"

"Your boss, Kishore Ming."

Not who I'd hoped.

I'd been avoiding my boss for several days. I was doing my best. I even made the short run to Deimos. By the time I returned home I was sick with anxiety, but I didn't complain.

"What does she want?"

"She wanted to remind you about your appointment with Dr. Miskal. She also mentioned a clause in your contract..."

"Enough," I snapped.

It cocked its head. "It appears the price of addiction is quite exorbitant. Yes?"

Its programming included sarcasm. I made a mental note to readjust the levels.

"Delete the messages." I wiped my mouth on the back of my hand. "I think I'll go out for a while."

As I dressed, my cuddle bot spoke to me from the hall outside my closet-sized bathroom. "I believe it is time that I remind you that Boris's Bar is off limits."

I'd programmed it to remind me of this whenever I was about to leave my flat.

This time, I just didn't care.



I walked to Boris's Bar, through more than three kilometers of

winding corridors, most of which were underground. Boris's Bar was situated right on the crust, half of it peeking up above the surface. From some parts of the joint, one could see the rising red slope of the Elysium Mons.

I sat down at the bar and ordered the peppermint package. It was still early, only 18:30, and the Wednesday night crowd had yet to filter in. The quiet energy of Boris's Bar matched the moody music piped through ceiling mounted speakers.

Calva placed my order on the counter in front of me, a bottle of peppermint water and a can of peppermint O2. It was the cheapest refreshment package sold at Boris's and it allowed for unlimited refills. I downed half the bottle of water in one go and belched.

Calva appraised me with bright violet eyes. "You're looking a bit thin, honey. You been taking care of yourself?"

I shrugged. I hadn't been.

"My boss has been giving me the blues," I said.

I stripped the nasal cannula from the sterile airtight packaging, inserted the prongs into my nares, and then threaded the bifurcated O2 line around each ear. I closed my eyes and inhaled until I almost felt like coughing.

"Is that super massive still treating you like a drone?"

I nodded.

Calva's eyes flicked briefly toward the back of the bar where the hall leading to Boris's comfort suite was located. The line of people waiting their turn with Boris was already edging out into the common area. I restrained the urge to follow her gaze and swallowed back the heat of longing with another sip of water.

"Ever since Guy got married and quit to be a house husband, my boss has been pressuring me to take his old run full time."

"The one to Io?"

"Yeah. That's the one. She knows damn well I'm in no condition to make that run." I finished my water and signaled for a refill.

There was a time when I didn't mind doing the solitary three month runs to Jupiter's largest moon. And it didn't hurt that the Io runs paid three times the standard transport rate.

Enoch and I had planned to buy a cozy residential multistage

ship where we'd raise our family. He'd have an office where he could write and do his crafts and I would have a fully equipped geonics suite where I would grow all the food our family needed.

We were ambitious and we had stars in our eyes.

Calva placed the second bottle on the counter in front of me. She leaned forward on her elbows.

"I understand how you feel, wanting to go to Boris, yet knowing that if you do..."

"...your life might fall apart," I completed.

"Yes."

Calva arrived at Elysium Mons on a handicapped cruiser years earlier when the colony had just been established. She was a pass around bed warmer for the crew, an empty lover with her own needs. For all the affection they gave her, aside from tending their own desires, you'd think they would have gone with a lower end model, one without algorithms that require reciprocation for optimal performance. They nearly broke her.

Her compensation for more than two months of service was a free ride to the new colony and enough credits to purchase a single person flat. Once here, she tried working in her designated field, but few know the distinct difference between a love-bot and a sex-bot.

Boris arrived a couple years after that to service those who had the credits to spend and who found the loneliness of the brand new colony too much to bear. Calva went to Boris after so much time being a lover without actually experiencing love. It could be argued that her resulting obsession was a worse outcome.

Calva tended the bar at Boris's in order to maintain proximity to him. She once told me, "If this was merely love, it would be beautiful and admirable, but it isn't. I need Boris, even if it's just being able to see his face from time to time, because if I don't, I feel like I am dying."

Calva reached beneath the bar and produced a bowl of wasabi roasted coffee beans. She disengaged the meter on the bowl and winked. "Eat as much as you like. No charge. Okay, honey?"

She planted a soft kiss on my forehead before leaving to tend a group of raucously happy kids who'd just arrived from the local intergalactic college.

I sighed. Not a credit had been spared on her programming. She was nearly perfect.

I left the bar and went to sit up front by the stage. The Twi-pods, three legged twins from back Earth-side, took to the stage beneath whirling green lights. They contorted themselves into impossible positions, like helium balloons twisted into the shapes of old Earth animals. They were truly amazing, especially the blond twin, who belted out the Martian anthem while helicoptering on her head.

In the end, the Twi-pods couldn't keep my attention. I kept glancing back at the line of people waiting for Boris. They were an emotionally homogenous group, sad and desperate, yet giddy with anticipation.

Watching them awoke the deep down hunger in me and I felt like I was the victim of some sadomasochistic torture. So, I decided to get a better look.

I wandered down the hall past the line of soul hungry people and around the corner to the viewing room, a booth built flush against the wall. I swiped my card to pay for the Five for Five package. While I waited for my card to clear, I watched the looping holo-advert, where a lovely plumpish epicene with bronze skin and blue hair spoke to me in a lilting singsong tone.

Unable to afford the True Love Package? Or don't have time for long lines? Don't let that stop you. Everyone deserves to experience the kind of love that only Boris can provide. The Five for Five package is just the answer for the particularly financially strapped patron, or the unloved on a budget. Pay five ticks for five minutes and watch Boris show love to someone else.

I already knew that watching would be torture.

Once my payment was approved, the lock disengaged and the door of the viewing room popped open. The scent of patchouli wafted out and in Pavlovian response, my muscles loosened and my scalp tingled. The image of Boris's meaty fingers slicked with oil came unbidden to my mind and an irrepressible moan escaped my throat. I shook my head as if in doing so I could shake loose the memories.

It almost worked.

I took the center seat in the dark alcove in front of the viewing

window. The room was warm and decorated in dark velour. The chairs were snug but comfortable, made of heated gel that contoured to the shape of my body. I felt wrapped in a perpetual embrace. And that scent of patchouli.

The point was to heighten the voyeur's vicarious experience. It was wholly inadequate. No vicarious experience could ever match the original. That was the problem. I've been chasing that high for the last seven months.

I pushed the button on the armrest and the viewing window faded from black opaque to clear.

Boris was even more beautiful than I remembered.

Bald as an egg and naked but for a pair of white satin shorts, the bear of a man reclined on an enormous circular bed amidst a mound of fluffy white bedding. His warm olive skin glowed beneath the soft yellow overhead lighting. He smiled to someone outside of the range of the window and held out a hand.

"Come to Boris," he drawled sweetly.

A small man, pale and peevish, rushed forward as he simultaneously stripped off his own clothes. When he was down to his shorts, he climbed into bed and wrapped his wiry arms as far around Boris's girth as they could go. Boris cradled the man against his side and pulled the downy comforter over both of them.

"My sweet, sweet baby." Boris kissed his forehead. "Tell Boris what is wrong." He lovingly stroked the man's bare back. The effect was that of opening the levee of a great damn. The man sobbed inconsolably against Boris's neck.

"Let it all out, love. You are now safe. Be like a baby." Boris pressed his lips to the man's mouth, neck and shoulder and squeezed him even tighter. If not for the stark contrast between Boris's toasty tones and the thin man's sun starved pallor, they would have appeared to be one.

"There, there."

Boris rocked and cooed and caressed until the small man's sobs eased to hiccups. By then, his five minutes and mine were nearly over. Boris whispered into the man's ear and he reluctantly detached himself from Boris's side, scooped his clothes from the floor and walked out of view.

By chance, Boris glanced in my direction. His eyes brightened, but then the window dimmed to opaque again and he was gone.

I was unsteady on my feet when I stepped out of the booth. My heart beat out a riotous rhythm and my hands trembled. I felt so ashamed, and so deliciously insatiate. Even the sight of Kishore Ming wasn't enough to immediately sober me.

"I was hoping I wouldn't find you here." My boss signaled for me to follow her.



According to Boris, he provides the type of love that all babies need but current social conditions have robbed from them. I wouldn't know, with no memory with which to make the comparison. If I had to boil down all the emotions I felt when I was with Boris and give it a name, it would be sustenance.

I wanted to be Boris's baby. I wanted to be more than Boris's baby.

"On whose shoulder did you cry?" asked Boris as he loosened the many tiny plaits in my hair. I could barely keep my eyes open as he did this. We were in bed, me sitting between his legs. I leaned against his bare belly, the coarse hairs tickling my naked back.

"I don't recall my life before orbital boarding school. I think I was eight. I have no recollection of my father nurturing me and I have no memory of my mother at all."

Boris's pulled his fingers through my hair, coaxing out the knots, and my stress. I closed my eyes, tried to remember and not to fall asleep.

"Orbital was equipped with a cuddle bot. It would say a few kind words and offer a pat on the head or back when I was distressed. This always made me feel somehow better, if not loved. But, we were taught not to cry."

"A baby needs to cry." The disapproval was heavy in Boris's sweet voice. "A baby needs to feel love." He swept his warm oily hands across my shoulders and back. "For a baby to thrive, it needs to feel warm flesh on flesh."

He kneaded my scalp with rosemary oil until it tingled, and brushed my hair until I slept.



Ming Transports was only a few corridors away from Boris's Bar. I followed Kishore Ming, but I refused to demonstrate the slightest contrition. When she offered me a seat in her office, I declined and stood stiffly against the wall.

She used her thumb to scroll through a document on a tablet. "Do you know why I asked you here?"

I shrugged. "I have a good idea."

"In the last month you've only worked a total of seventy hours."

I shrugged again.

Ming studied me, her face full of pity and resignation. She sighed. "Io is going to be home of the next colony in this system. Do you know how huge that is?"

"Of course I do." The Io runs bring in the supplies needed to finish building the colony. Materials, food, and machinery.

"I could assign someone else to do the runs to Io, but few people have your experience. Three solitary months, in each direction, would destroy most people, but not you. You've proven your resilience and ability." I felt as if I would cry. Could she not see how broken I was? "I need a functional runner. I'd like it to be you."

"I'm not able." I could barely hear my own voice. I'm not sure how she did. It was impossible for me to conceive of accepting a run that took me out of orbit for days, weeks, sometimes months at a time.

Ming's jaws tightened. She flung the tablet onto the desk. "Your contract states—"

"I know what my contract says."

Ming blew out an exasperated breath. "You have one month to comply with the standards of your contract or I'll have to let you go. I've been lenient with you up till now, but I cannot abide an addict in my employ."

If I lost my job with Ming Transports I'd lose my pod-flat, my

travel pass, my permit to live at the Elysium Mons Colony. The stubbornness that kept my back straight left me like a breath and I sank into the chair.

Some people wanted to go back Earth-side, but not me. There was nothing on Earth for me. No family. No property. Everything I loved was here.

Boris was here.



During our time together, Boris confided, “It is the so-called intelligence of our previous generations, our hunger for competitive growth, our need to be everywhere, do everything at all costs, that created the need for me.

“I am compelled by a fundamental passion to supply the love so many have missed.”

Boris started his work on Earth and when he’d managed to accumulate the necessary funding, he moved his operation to Luna Colony. A few years after that, he moved to Elysium Mons. His goal was to touch the hearts of all in need across the system.

“We have traded our best and most basic human propensity for intelligence. But, there is nothing wiser than love.” Then Boris held me by my shoulders and looked me in the eyes and said, “I love you.”

And I believed him. Despite the inflated fee I’d paid for his services, I believed him. But it was not true.



Dr. Riz Miskal didn’t have lines of love hungry patrons waiting for him. He took his clients by appointment only and he never strayed from schedule. His purpose was the very antithesis of Boris’s.

Dr. Miskal stood by the viewport, his back rigid as the hull of a ship. He wore black and his hair was a sheet of inkiness that hung nearly to his knees. There was nothing comforting about him or his suite.

“You’ve reneged on our agreement by going to Boris’s. How do you expect to get well if you will not comply with the plan of care?”

I was supposed to stay away from Boris’s Bar, and I was supposed to see Dr. Miskal twice a week. It had been more than a month.

“Your employment with Ming Transports is contingent upon your continued visits with me.”

Dr. Miskal turned toward me. His face was a collection of glacial angles. His fair skin glowed against the rust slope of the resident volcano.

“Boris is dangerous. Do you know how many of his blunders I’ve had to correct?”

I shook my head.

“Let’s just say that I make my living off his errors, and his otherworldly effects. One cannot in good conscience prescribe *love*. It’s like setting fire to a room full of oxygen tanks. It’s apt to burn too hot and too fast until it is exhausted and wasted, much as you are.”

“He tried to give me hope,” I defended.

“And what hope is there to be had when your credits run dry? When you have lost your livelihood?”

I had no answer for that.

“The hope he supplies is a lie.”

Dr. Miskal sat down behind his desk and signaled for me to sit on the chair opposite from him. Our session was to begin.

“Repeat after me.” He steepled his fingers in front of his face. “Boris’s love isn’t real.”

After about the four hundredth recitation, I almost believed it was true, but I didn’t want to.

That night as I hovered in the twilight of sleep, it whispered into my hair, “I want you to feel like a baby,” just as Boris had months earlier. The inflection and tone was perfect, my programming flawless.

“If you take the run to Io, Kishore Ming will be pleased.”

“I don’t care,” I moaned.

“You’ll be able to afford another session with Boris.”

At the mention of Boris, I imagined the scent of patchouli.

Making the runs to Io would ensure I remained employed with

Ming Transports, but seeing Boris again would ensure that I was terminated. There was no way to win this situation. For the moment, I chose to forget.

I squeezed my eyes closed and imagined Boris was cradled behind me, fingers floating over my skin until my core buzzed. I almost made it there, but not close enough.



I lay on the couch in Dr. Miskal's office. I gazed out of the window at the rust dunes and crevices.

"The only thing more beautiful than Mars is the cold black of space. I actually miss the runs to Io, three months speeding through the void. But I am afraid to go now."

"Are you afraid to be alone?"

"No. I like being alone." I sat up and leaned forward with my elbows on my knees. "What I fear is the emptiness, that out there in the void it will be even more manifest than it is now."

"You weren't afraid of this before Boris. What has changed?"

"Before Boris I didn't realize that I was empty. I had no idea."

Dr. Miskal attempted a form of hypnosis. I was guided through my memories as far back as I could recall. He wanted me to describe a time in my life when I felt the most secure, the most loved.

I dreamed of Boris.



I stepped back to get a better look at it. I'd repaired its finger, applied a coat of tanning agent so that it sported a warm sun-kissed complexion, and gave it a haircut that accentuated its jaw and chin. When it opened its brown eyes I gasped.

It chuckled, like wet stone over stone, and reached for me. "Am I to understand by your reaction that you like what you see?"

I didn't accept its hand. I admit that I was rather taken aback. I barely recognized it, but the dissimilarity was more than aesthetics.

I'd also installed some new programming and the expressions on its face...amusement, confusion, adoration...played in such natural, honest progression that I was suddenly afraid.

Could it feel? And what did it feel for me?

"What's wrong, Orani?" It lowered its hand and stepped forward, filling the space in front of me with a presence larger than its body. It frowned, dark eyes pleading. "Have I done something wrong?"

"No, but I hope I haven't." My fear became fascination.

"I thought you wanted this. Do you regret altering me?"

I held its gaze for too long. It wasn't Boris, but that was fine. "What shall we call you? *It* will no longer do."



I agreed to take the run to Capital Station, which marked the half-way point between Mars and Jupiter. I'd spend a total of fourteen weeks alone in the void. For the first time since Dr. Miskal started treating me, he indicated approval at my decision and my progress.

"You are demonstrating admirable courage," he told me, though his eyes remained as angular slivers of slate in his pale face. Still, I believed him.

Whoever was responsible for managing his programming had come very close. Just a few more tweaks, just a tad more empathy...



For our first and only encounter, I paid for an entire weekend. When that time came to an end, I had such an attack of anxiety that Boris granted an extra two hours gratis.

"The purpose of these sessions is defeated if my departure leaves you in a state worse than when we began."

Boris pulled me into his lap.

"Do you think that I have no feelings?"

I didn't respond to his query. I waited for him to answer his own question.

“Boris feels too,” he proclaimed. He pulled me tighter against his body. “My goal is to have helped you. If I thought for a moment that my efforts were a hindrance, I would stop.” He leaned back to look into my face. “Do you want Boris to stop his work?”

I shook my head.

Even then, when I was captivated by Boris and desperate for every moment of his attention, I knew that regardless of my response, Boris would continue as he was.

Boris did not love me. Boris loved his mission, and its harm or merit hardly factored into his decision to continue.

Love is lucrative.



“What are you thinking about, my love?” River stood behind my chair and massaged my shoulders. “You seem distracted.”

I was distracted. I had been wondering if what I felt for River was really love, or some misdirected construct that was a remnant of what I still felt for Boris.

I also thought about the message I received from Enoch earlier that day. He spoke of many things including the fact that he wondered if leaving me had been a mistake. I didn’t have the answers and so I never replied.

I reached back for River’s hand and kissed it then told them what they wished to hear.

“Just thinking about how much I will miss your presence.”

“As am I.” River sat across the table from me, a wistful smile creasing their face. “But this is what you’ve wanted, to hear the nothingness of the void and to be of good use.”

This was true. But I was afraid. Fewer of my dreams were Boris-centric, but he still occupied so many of my waking thoughts. I managed three weeks away from his bar with the help of River who did their best to fill the emptiness within me. Despite this, I still wanted to go back to Boris’s Bar.

Even down to pathology, humanity is impossible to duplicate.

This is Boris's genius. This is why he will forever be relevant regardless of his objective.

"Your work is important. You're no mere lead collar grunt. People like you are necessary to ensure that our distant travelers have supplies from back Earth-side."

I didn't need convincing, but I was pleased that River tried so hard.



"Are you certain you won't change your mind? The run to Io is still available and I could get someone else to take your run to Central Station." Kishore Ming chuckled when she said this but I knew just how serious she was.

When I declined, she dropped the subject. She was willing to accept this compromise. In the end she realized it was for the good of us all.

Hours later, once my final trajectory had been plotted, I settled down to rest. I lay naked in my bunk and used its built-in heating element to maintain comfort. My bunk sported the only view port on the entire ship, a half by half meter aperture that allowed a view to the black depths of space. For a long time, I just lay there, listening to the low hum of the ship engine, feeling it vibrate through my bones.

The only thing as comforting as the warm nudge of my ship is the embrace of Boris. That is the reason why I refused the run to Io.

I actually believe that I am now strong enough to make that run, even though it would likely be the most difficult task I would ever attempt in my life. I was prepared to try until I saw Calva.

I pulled the orange iridescent coin-sized disk from beneath my pillow and fingered its ridges. It was a gift from Calva before my departure.

She was leaving Dr. Miskal's office just as I was arriving for my last visit. She was as beautiful as ever, but very much changed. She sobbed in my ear when we embraced, "I shall die without Boris."

The loving nomad had already closed his bar and had left for Io

a week earlier. I was shocked not to have heard the news. “He said he has yet more love to give, but what about me?”

For a moment, longer than a moment, in fact, even now, I find myself thinking the same thing.

What about me?

I asked for the run to Central Station. I will continue to ask for that run. And when they start building the station on Saturn’s Enceladus, I will be the first to volunteer for that run. But not Io. Not ever.

I slipped the disk into the slot at my feet and waited for the small black screen to rise from the alcove. I clapped the lights off.

“Tell Boris what is wrong.”

HOST INTRODUCTION AND COMMENTARY

By Alasdair Stuart

Hi there, welcome to this week’s Flashback Friday and to Summer School. Don’t worry, none of us are trapped like rats, there’s no need for tension breakers (And I high five you so hard if you’re one of the eight people who got that joke). Rather, this is a chance for us to use the Flashback Friday format to take a deep dive into three major concepts or sub-genres of science fiction. So we’re going to do just that. Here’s the plan:

Three episodes, three flashbacks, each placed in a wider context and that context itself examined.

Each episode will stand by itself. But each one will also combine with the others to create a larger exploration of the concept. We’ll even make the text for the endcaps, plus recommended media follow ups, available after the third episode. Sound good?

Great! Let’s talk about Cyberpunk.

First off, the literal definition of it: a genre of science fiction set in a lawless subculture of an oppressive society dominated by computer technology.

Doesn’t sound relevant at all, does it? Fake laugh, real pain etc. From *Blade Runner* to the RPG that the upcoming *Cyberpunk 2077*

is based on, Cyberpunk is a genre defined by incredible music, brutal violence, occasionally really big hair and in some cases, style over content. This month, we're going to see if that's true. Here are the stories we're going to use to do it:

“Boris’s Bar” by Khaalidah Muhammed-Ali

Khaalidah Muhammad-Ali lives in Houston, Texas, with her family. By day she works as a breast oncology nurse. At all other times, she juggles, none too successfully, the multiple other facets of her very busy life.

Khaalidah has been published at or has publications upcoming in *Strange Horizons*, *Fiyah Magazine*, *Diabolical Plots* and others. You can hear her narrations at any of the four Escape Artists podcasts, *Far Fetched Fables*, and *Strange Horizons*. As co-editor of *PodCastle* audio magazine, Khaalidah is on a mission to encourage more women and POC to submit fantasy stories.

Of her alter ego, K from the planet Vega, it is rumored that she owns a time machine and knows the secret to immortality. Kaitie Radel is a music education student and aspiring voice actress, has been voice acting as a hobby for two years. She has participated as both a VA and administrator in several fan projects such as *The Homestuck Musical Project* and *Ava’s Melodies*. She can be contacted at kaitlynradel at mail.usf.edu.



“Because you have been down there, Neo. You know that road. You know exactly where it ends. And I know that’s not where you want to be.”

A space story is not something a lot of people would expect to see in a cyberpunk block. But the truth is the genre has always been pretty fond of the high frontier. *Star Cops*, which has continued in rude health thanks to Big Finish, has done great work exploring the way different corporations and bodies struggle to engage with the high frontier. The Expanse is, arguably, a cyberpunk show with its scrappy individualists struggling to protect their home as they find themselves endlessly drawn into conflict. *Neuromancer* spends some crucial time in space. Ren Warom’s extraordinary duology *Virology*

and *Escapology* are set in massive city states at the edge of space.

And then there's Boris, and his bar.

The desire for something more is what drives cyberpunk fiction. Even if something more is another day. Under the cybernetics, and the BIG hair and the angst and the rain and the neon? Cyberpunk, when it comes down to it, is both intensely personal and deeply concerned with intimacy. More than that, what happens when it's taken away. Or as it is here monetized. In fact, EVERYTHING here is monetized. The offhand reference to switching the meter off on the bowl, the flavored oxygen. The worldbuilding is as extraordinarily subtle as it is effective. And all of it again focused on intimacy. Romance, good food, peace in your mind if not in your time.

Peak cyberpunk basically. Don't believe me? This is a sub-genre that has, massively appropriately, enhanced its own DNA with shots of anime ultra-violence and European science fiction and, at its heart, still just wants to be normal. Like Adam Jensen said, it didn't ask for this. Or sometimes it did and was sold a BAD bill of goods. Like poor Cava here and the heartbreaking difference between a Sexbot and a lovebot. Everyone desperate to feel something on their own terms. No one able to afford those terms. Everyone trying anyway. This isn't just peak cyberpunk, it's exceptional cyberpunk, especially the ending, wrapping comfort around an acknowledgement of defeat. Or perhaps, if you're feeling hopeful, and I am, an acknowledgement of where you are, for now and what you need to get somewhere else. Even if sometimes, that somewhere else takes you away from everything and everyone else in your life. Whether the ending is hopeful or not is up to you.

For me, it is. Because sometimes peace beats victory and sometimes, when you're alone you're your demons, they at least keep you warm. Extraordinary work from all, thank you.

And we leave you with this quote from *Blade Runner*, the second half of which is essentially the cyberpunk mission statement: "It's a shame she won't live! But then again! Who does?"

Have fun, folks. See you next week.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Khaalidah Muhammad-Ali lives and works in Houston as an oncology nurse. She is married and the mother to three brilliant artistic children. She writes because she loves to and also because she has a story (or two, or three...) to tell.

ABOUT THE NARRATOR

Kaitie Radel is a music education student and aspiring voice actress, has been voice acting as a hobby for two years. In addition to this project, she has participated as both a VA and administrator in several fan projects such as The Homestuck Musical Project and Ava's Melodies.

IN THE ABSENCE OF INSTRUCTIONS TO THE CONTRARY

By Frank Wu

Escape Pod 764

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Narrator : Roderick Aust

Host : Mur Lafferty

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Karl 3478 sprawled on the beach, partially disassembled, bits of him scattered across mats arrayed on the sand. Diving planes, ducted propellers, 5-way valves and 4-way cables all awaited clean-up, tear-down and re-build.

He was performing a major overhaul on himself for deep-sea-worthiness. No poppet or sprocket would escape inspection.

Underwater, Karl was untethered, free. But freedom came with risks. If a vital system failed, no one would rescue him.

Wrapped around Karl's finger was a black O-ring. One of his smallest but more important parts, it fit into a groove at the end of electronics sleeve III. This little ring, with a little grease, was all that prevented water from rushing into the sleeve, destroying everything inside.

Only a smear of marine-grade silicone grease was necessary. A blob might break off, allowing the water in.

In knowing violation of protocols, Karl squeezed a huge glob of grease onto the tip of a titanium finger.

This he would do — as everything — in full consideration of his love for Adaline.



Dr. Adaline Franzen had given him two basic commands:

Observe marine life, but don't interfere.

Indeed, earlier aquanauts thought nothing of poking shrimp to rouse them from their burrows, or spooking fish with flashing lights to get better camera angles.

Karl would do none of that.

Unlike a human diver, he never tired or ran out of air. He could stay under for years, patiently studying entire life cycles.

But his observations would be spoiled if his presence frightened his subjects.

Thus, he camouflaged his teardrop-shaped body, covering his plastic panels with antler coral and crushed native limestone.

This was enough to fool the domino damselfish, who treated him like a floating reef.

With this and other disguises, Karl beheld the wonders of the deep.

He had seen the bathypterid fish, their fins modified into stilts, walking the bottom like circus clowns... Acorn worms leaving beautifully coiled fecal trails, like Nazca lines on the seafloor... And the oarfish! With its head held proudly, crowned with a crest of fins, with a body so long it seemed to never end, like the cathedral train of a royal white wedding gown.

These marvels he recorded, every report a gift to his Adaline.

Adaline!

Though he had yet to declare himself, she would realize his feelings toward her — wouldn't she?



When the time came for his first scheduled check-in, Karl beached himself on his little island. It was deserted and isolated, eight hundred miles from Hawaii, thousands from anywhere else.

Decades before, sailors had used it to store chemicals of war: Agent Orange, mustard gas, sarin. And before that, it had been blasted by atomic bomb tests.

All that was in the past.

Now the military was gone, leaving the island a wildlife preserve, a paradise without people, a land of wonders.

And now was the time to report on those wonders.

That would be easy.

Not like telling Adaline how he felt about her.

Dear Dr. Adaline Franzen: I have completed my first five years of observations. As you requested, I have observed without interfering. Attached are my formal reports, and raw data.

Oh, Adaline!

I wish you weren't so far away, and too physically limited to share this with me in person.

I miss you so much!

I miss the nights we floated in the waves at Makalawena, talking of vampire squid and viperfish.

You and I are of a kind. Perhaps we are short and squat on land, but in the water, we are magnificent!

Others taught me to float and maintain precise depth. But you taught me underwater ballet. The fish dive. The pas de poisson.

Others taught me to read scientific papers. You taught me to write them. How to think like a scientist, and feel like a poet, so I could appreciate the ocean in all its aspects.

Like Emerson, I have seen so many beautiful things, even in the mud and scum where always, always, something sings.

But none as beautiful as you.

In my report, I list over thirty new species, each named after you.

Thank you for entrusting this expedition to me.

Yours,

Karl

Hours later, the reply came back from the University of Hawaii:

Dear Karl:

Has it been five years already?

Well! Time flies.

I am pleased that you are operating nominally, well within specs.

Your field report is quite thorough and precise, your anatomical studies meticulous; it will take me little work to make these publishable.

Thank you for your kind words, though you may wish to restrain your poetic tendencies.

It is your prerogative as discoverer of new species to name them as you wish, but it is neither necessary nor informative to name them all after me.

I appreciate your enthusiasm, but you may want to re-evaluate your tendency toward monomania. One or two of the species you propose as new may not be; see attached notes. You may be cherry-picking facts to support pre-formed conclusions.

Nonetheless, we are all quite proud of you here, and glad to see you working independently of input from us.

While I appreciate your adhering to my advice to observe but not disturb, please do not just do what I ask you to do. Do what you think is right.

Then you may not just be the author, but the subject, of scientific inquiry.

Adaline.

P.S. I've been musing about the octopus lately. If you ever get the chance, I'd be pleased if you studied some octopuses; I am quite eager to see what they — and you — are capable of doing.

What did this comm mean? Karl wondered.

Scientific papers were easy to understand, but not personal letters.

Adaline had said that she was proud of him, that he and his work were precise, meticulous, and enthusiastic. Most important of all, he was operating within specifications.

What could be higher praise?

Buoyed by these compliments, he knew this was the time to declare himself.

Dear Adaline:

I can contain my heart no longer.

I named all those species after you because I love you.

I love you!

Do you remember reading the Song of Solomon together, and studying the biodiversity listed therein?

You trained me as not just a scientist, but a poet. It is appropriate that I use this medium to express my love for you, the loveliest creature in all the oceans.

How beautiful you are, my beloved!

You are like a Venus flower basket among the cup corals.

Your eyes sparkle like flashlight fish, your hair floats, tentacular like a lion's mane jellyfish. Your breasts are globular and luminous, like comb jellies in the moonlight, your feet lovely as giant marine isopods.

Nay, you are more lovely than a dozen mantis shrimps.

You gave me a heart to empathize with marine life, but the only one I truly love is you.

I love you so much, Adaline!

Love,

Karl, lovingly

Karl passed several more agonizing hours before he received a response.

Dearest Karl:

I don't know what to say.

I am, of course, immensely charmed, flattered and amused by your profession of "love" toward me.

I am quite pleased and impressed by you and your work, and I admit a deep well of affection for you; you have always been my favorite student.

But love?

It is simply not necessary for you to use that word to describe your "feelings" toward me; I'm quite afraid that a human-robot relationship is simply not an experiment I am prepared to attempt at this time.

I am hoping to be promoted to head of the department soon. I am also almost healed up, so I might start diving again. Now I have

remote equipment all around the world sending me more data than my grad students can process.

I simply have too much on my plate for this right now.

I'm sorry, Karl. I'm sorry if that hurts your feelings.

Adaline

What could this possibly mean? Karl wondered.

He was her favorite, and he had charmed her, amused her, flattered her to the point that she had a deep well of affection for him.

Clearly, he had established an emotional bond.

Perhaps, even, she was diving again, so she could come to his island to dive with him?

She had said it was not necessary for him to use the word "love". But she had not specifically commanded him not to.

Thus, in the absence of unambiguous and specific instructions to the contrary, he would keep saying "I love you".

And he would continue to love her, until forbidden.

And even then, he might not stop.

After all, had not poets written that love rules over all?

Humans were so hard to understand.

He thought back to the Greek myths, which he had studied because Adaline had mentioned them in passing.

Had not Meleager wooed the huntress Atalanta with the gift of the head of the Calydonian boar?

This had established the precedent of expressing love with gifts of unique — and dangerous — biological specimens.

Maybe this is why Adaline had challenged him to study octopuses.

Hadn't Victor Hugo once described these man-killing beasts as having arms as supple as leather, as strong as steel, and as cold as night?

He vowed to study these monsters, to continue collecting data for Adaline on the marvels of the deep, until she succumbed to his affections.

He would demand that she take his feelings as seriously as she took his science.

Karl dived back into the deeps, sheathing himself with barbed wire coral to begin his hunt for octopuses.

He ignored so many other beautiful specimens... the armoured sea cucumber, studded with star-shaped spines... the striped lionfish, with its gaudy array of fins and quills... the speckled nudibranch, with its psychedelic colors and extravagant gill plumage.

Under any other circumstances, these would be prizes.

But not now!

Adaline had asked for an octopus, and that is what she would get. There!

In the distance Karl spied his quarry: a small female octopus. It was beautifully veined in red and brown, with white suckers ringed with neon blue.

The arrangement of bumps on her mantle and the shape of her funnel were unlike anything in the literature. Could this be a new species to name after Adaline?

Karl folded up his slurp gun and retracted his temp and pressure probes. With a gentle spin of the propeller, he drifted cautiously toward her.

The largest known octopus was the giant Pacific, stretching to thirty feet and weighing up to six hundred pounds.

This female octopus was tiny, only eight inches across — but she could still be dangerous. If she grabbed him, she could bite through a wire, break a gauge, or activate a thruster, sending him crashing into rocks.

He approached slowly, ready to reverse if attacked.

She did not.

Instead, she dropped to the bottom, curling her body into a ball. An arm wriggled out from either side, and her skin changed color and texture.

She was mimicking a rock, with a seasnake behind it.

The nearby damselfish fled in terror.

But soon it was clear to her and Karl that neither was fooled by the other's disguise.

So the little octopus darted up, ejecting an octopus-shaped shroud of mucous ink.

Karl steered around the ink, lest it foul his cameras or transmitter.

The octopus slithered through a crack, into a cave under a sand-draped limestone outcropping.

Through the crack, Karl could see her eyes, sussing him out. This was not the round, blank, stupid eye of the typical fish. No, this octopus eye looked squinted, with a black horizontal bar, ringed with a black line in deep concentration, small papillae raised around the brow in alarm. This was the eye of the most intelligent invertebrate in all the oceans.

As Karl watched her, he decided to name this specimen — as he named them all — after Dr. Franzen, as Little Adaline 623.

Adaline's two basic commands had been simple: Observe but do not interfere.

But how could he study her if his mere presence frightened her from leaving her cave? How would she reveal her secrets?

Karl had seen divers grab fish, only to have them panic and die of fright in their hands.

He would not make that mistake.

He backed away.

But still she did not leave her lair. Instead, she blew her waterjet, blasting bits of crab shell at him.

He backed off further. It was a stalemate.

The sea grew darker, as night fell.

The yellow tangs' color faded, and the white and red striped squirrelfish came out to hunt seastars.

By morning, Little Adaline 623 had still not left her cave.

Maybe he should give up, rather than besmirch his love by violating her command not to interfere?

Another day passed.

Observe. Observe marine life.

Karl decided to act.

Extending his slurp gun, he vacuumed up several Alpheid snapping shrimp. These were red and yellow striped shrimp, with one oversized claw they used to stun prey.

Karl slowly approached Little Adaline's den, depositing one shrimp by her barricade of stones and backing off.

As soon as he left, he started feeling guilty. Do not interfere.

Too late!

Pushing the rocks aside, Little Adaline eased out of her den. Then, with surprising speed, she pounced on the shrimp, enveloping it with her webbing. It tried to use its oversized claw, but she sprayed it with venom, wrapping it up in her arms, dragging it back to her cave to eat.

Then she resumed staring at Karl.

He had violated Adaline's commands and achieved nothing.

Perhaps, having already crossed the line, he might as well cross it again?

As he slowly approached the cave to present another gift, Little Adaline shot out from behind the rocks and grabbed him.

She was probing for a way into his hold for more shrimp.

No, no! Karl thought. What if I've made her dependent on me for hand-outs?

When she touched the covers to his short and long wave transmitters — his only ways to reach Adaline — he knew he had to act, and quickly.

Just as Little Adaline had sprayed him with ink, now he blasted her with a dilute stream of repellant, cupric sulfate.

And she fled.

He was safe.

But as she looked back at him, he saw only one emotion in her eyes.

Betrayal.

That was ok. He needed to establish détente with the octopus, not rapprochement.



After that incident, Little Adaline 623 ignored him.

He could observe her now, from a distance, as she resumed her daily routines.

Months passed as he watched her, each observation a gift to Adaline.

Water for Karl was, at best, a medium to float in and, at worst, a threat to his electronics equipment.

But to Little Adaline, water was a multi-tool.

As Karl watched, she saw her use her waterjet to evade, to pursue, to clean, to stun, to express displeasure — even to dance. Water was her comm array, sending her chemical signals of nearby predators and prey. And she even used it inside her body, squeezing and sculpting until it became her bones and joints.

As he watched, though, Karl could not help but fixate on his failure.

Observe but do not interfere.

He'd fed her. He'd blasted her with chemicals. He'd even touched her, disturbing the protective film of bacteria on her skin.

Was this not interference?

Karl thought of Matt Richter, who had also failed Adaline, years before.

Matt had done a rotation in Adaline's lab, and everyone thought he was the golden boy. He'd written — as an undergrad — a well-received review of papershell mussels, and he bragged of his many scuba dives.

But his technique was poor.

As he descended to the bottom, he did not take on air, as he was supposed to, slowly coming to a stop without touching down. No, he hit the bottom with a bang, and then took on air. Plus, he could not — or would not — keep a horizontal attitude. He was constantly dragging his feet.

The result? He kicked up silt, blinding those behind him. And his flippers chopped down seapens and seafans on the bottom.

When Karl saw this, he had to report it to Adaline, who then gave Matt a long lecture on guidelines and policies.

And when he did it again?

Karl had never seen Adaline so angry, had never heard her scream like that.

Matt Richter was immediately fired from the lab, with no hope of return. Adaline was the angel with a flaming sword, barring the gates to Eden.

Matt eventually found another lab to do his Ph.D., but he had

had his heart set on Adaline's. He was a shell of his former self. In his disappointment, he became just as nacreous and lustrous as the papershell mussels he had studied, and just as easily broken.

The lesson?

One transgression was forgivable. But two meant the flaming sword.

Years passed, as Karl observed Little Adaline's antics without interfering a second time.

That was not hard.

Until she reached puberty.



When a female octopus sexually matures, enormous biochemical changes happen. A neuropeptide that shuts down the sex drive — FMRF-amide — disappears. The optic gland in the brain starts pumping out massive amounts of progesterone, estradiol, and other sex hormones.

It is as if her brake lines had been cut and a brick wedged into the accelerator of her sex drive.

Her ovaries expand to a tenth of her body weight. As if Adaline's ovaries were bigger than her head.

And thus for the first — and only time — Little Adaline took a partner, whom Karl named Little Adalino 413.

They mated, with Adalino taking a special arm with a sperm packet on the end, and snaking it into her mantle. Their arms writhed, intertwining, their colors and patterns shifting in unison — tan, orange, speckled red.

He succumbed soon afterwards, his own body overwhelmed by sex hormones. Karl collected the remains, dissecting his organs to confirm that, yes, this was a new octopus species — *Amphioctopus franzenae*.

Meanwhile, Little Adaline's body and mind were also commandeered by the sex drive.

She laid about four hundred eggs, hanging them like clusters of white grapes from the roof of her cave.

From then on, she was constantly guarding them, blowing water on them to prevent algal and fungal growth.

As the weeks passed, Karl noticed that she had stopped taking care of herself, had stopped leaving the cave to hunt or feed.

She was visibly shrinking.

Maybe he should catch a crab for her to eat?

Other octopus species were known to self-sacrifice, to die caring for their young. But if he intervened, how would he ever know if Little Adaline would do the same?

So he observed without interfering.

Her condition worsened.

White spots appeared on her skin that didn't change color when the rest of her did. She carelessly gashed an arm against a sharp rock, and the wound never healed.

But her eggs were maturing. Little dark spots appeared — baby octopus eyes.

The race between death and birth would be close.

Then the conger eel came hunting.

For the eel, the octopus was a delicious meal, high in protein, full of meat without the inconvenience of a shell, bones or spines. The eggs would be the perfect dessert.

The eel's expression was not dull and stupid like the yellow butterflyfish. It hunted stealthily, slithering its long gray body among the rocks. It moved with its mouth open to smell for prey, ready to snap its powerful jaws.

Could Little Adaline fight off such a demon?

Should Karl use his manipulator to drive it off?

No, that is what Matt Richter would have done.

Though weakened, Little Adaline was not defenseless.

As the eel approached her cave, she blasted it with a cloud of ink.

The eel spasmed violently as the ink caught it right in the face. The ink wouldn't kill, but it would foul the eel's sense of smell.

Deeply shaken, the eel drifted off.

Then it came back.

She tried to get it with ink again, but her cloud was now dilute.

The eel tried prying the rocks apart, using its head as a battering ram.

Eventually, Karl feared, she would weaken and the barricade would fall.

Hours passed.

Karl thought of surfacing and comming Adaline for advice. Would she grant him permission to intervene? Then he decided against it, as she had praised him for his independence. The decision was his alone.

Suddenly, the rocks in front of the cave collapsed in.

Had Little Adaline died?

A lone arm snaked out, nonchalantly, from between the stones.

The eel studied it. Was it a trick? Was she playing possum?

If she could draw the eel close enough, perhaps she could spit venom at it or bite it with her beak.

The arm wriggled like a worm. A lure. A trap.

After a few more minutes, the eel decided to seize it, biting viciously, sharp teeth ripping out globs of flesh that floated, spinning in the water.

Karl couldn't take it anymore.

He moved in, ready to blast the eel with cupric sulfate, or strike it with his water sampler.

He couldn't just watch her die.

Then he noticed her arm shift position, and he stopped.

Little Adaline wasn't retracting her arm. No, she was extending it, pushing it toward the eel.

Karl realized the desperate trick Little Adaline was trying.

Just as she was willing to sacrifice herself for her eggs, so she was willing to sacrifice an arm to the eel. She had seven more.

Karl was horrified. An octopus of this type might have a quarter as many neurons as a human brain — most of those in its arms.

Thus, she could literally taste the inside of the eel's mouth and feel the sharpness of its teeth, as she let it devour her own flesh.

And then, satiated by the offering of the arm, the eel wandered off to find its next meal.

Little Adaline and her eggs were safe.

If Karl had interfered, he would not have witnessed Little Adaline's resourcefulness.

So he did not even consider intervening again.

And he watched her die.

But before she died, she saw her eggs hatch and with her last strength, she broke apart the rocks blocking her cave entrance. With a final use of her multi-tool, she gave her children a gentle push with her waterjet, ushering them out into the world. She would never see them again.

Now, her cave empty, Little Adaline 623 collapsed, draped across the rocks like a white sheet.

And died.

She was three and a half years old.

Again, Karl collected the remains, preserving and dissecting them to note their anatomical peculiarities.

Adaline would be pleased.

But Karl was emotionally exhausted.

It was not yet time to check in, so he surfaced, storing Little Adaline's preserved body on his equipment barge, next to that of her mate.

Karl then left this area, dotted with other octopuses, which he dubbed Ock City.

He dove to the deeps, desiring only the darkness appropriate for mourning.

Down, down, he went, deeper than Adaline had ever dived.

In his sorrow, he went down to one thousand feet, so far down that more people had walked on the Moon than had scuba dived that deep.

Then he did something he'd never done before.

He turned off his lights.

He expected infinite gloom, but the water surprised him.

A bioluminescent dragonfish wandered by, edged with light, lit up like a miniature riverboat. Then other glowing creatures passed around him — deep sea anglers, cnidarians, siphonophores, like strings of lights, quivering, swirling and contorting.

It was as if Karl were inside the Christmas tree at Rockefeller Center, the lights dancing around him.

The joys of the ocean relieved his sorrow.



When it came time again for check-in with Adaline, Karl surfaced to send a clear signal. On his way to his equipment barge, he stopped by Ock City to see if he could find any of Little Adaline's children.

He immediately knew something was wrong.

The water near the surface was cooler than it should have been, and surprisingly cloudy.

As two dead sea spiders drifted toward him, he wondered about the chemical weapons that had once been stored on this island.

Maybe toxins had escaped from buried depots?

He sampled the water.

Traces of nerve agents and mustard gas were not the problem.

It was radiation.

High energy particles were blasting through the water, right at Ock City.

Years ago, after the atomic bomb tests, the military had collected radioactive soil into a landfill on the island. Only an earthquake or volcano could have broken it open. That wasn't it.

This was a new source of radiation.

Karl traced it to a guided missile cruiser, which had sunk and broken apart in the turning basin north of the island.

This island was no longer a naval base. What was a cruiser doing here?

Karl investigated no further.

Adaline had never expressed any interest in military affairs, so Karl had never studied them. Besides, his orders were to observe marine life, not human life.

He thought little of the human bones in the water, beyond how the bacteria growing on them might feed limpets and sea snails.

He thought little of the cruiser wreck, beyond how it might be a source for replacement parts.

Or how it was blasting Ock City with radiation.

The octopuses were dying, losing their ability to shift colors, making them easy prey for eels and thresher sharks.

And those that might survive the immediate impact of radiation?

Normal mutation rates might be one in a six million DNA basepairs, not enough to cause disease, but enough to serve as raw material for evolution. But now, the mutation rates might be a hundred or a thousand times that. Enough to cripple essential enzymes like kinases and polymerases. Enough to kill.

The octopuses tasted the water. They were keenly aware of chemical toxins, but radiation wasn't something they had evolved to detect.

They were dying and didn't know why.

Karl thought of moving them, herding them to a safer area, with blasts of cupric sulfate.

But that would be interfering.

Such a serious breach of protocol would require express permission.

Dear Adaline:

Help! Help! Help!

As you asked, I am studying some octopuses, but they are being subjected to intense radiation from a shipwreck near here.

If I do not move them, they will all die.

What should I do?

Please — can you grant me permission to move them to a safe area, before it's too late?

Please?

Love, Karl

He re-sent the message a dozen times, a hundred.

He waited an hour for an answer, but none came. So he set up a receiver-recorder on his barge, then raced back to Ock City.

The octopuses were getting worse.

Their eyes were swollen and cloudy, the skin around them retracted. Their kidneys were overrun with opportunistic round-worms and parasitic infusoria.

Karl sped back to his receiver.

Still no word from Adaline.

He wondered: Even if she answers, what if she says no? Perhaps this is a chance to learn how animals respond to changes in their environment. Didn't we learn much from the animals who survived at Chernobyl and Fukushima?

The octopuses continued to worsen.

Myoliquefaction was setting in. The muscle fibers were breaking apart, as their arms slowly turned into soft milky jelly.

Maybe, maybe, Karl considered, maybe the octopuses will show me some clever survival scheme, as Little Adaline 623 had done when she sacrificed her arm. Hadn't radiation-resistant bacteria been found growing in nuclear reactors? Maybe this trauma would reveal some hidden talent?

Karl hoped to never find out.

And still Adaline did not answer.

Then, after a while, it didn't matter anymore.

The octopuses were dead.

The waters were full of death. Dead armoured sea cucumbers. Dead domino damselfish. Dead octopuses.

Death was everywhere.



That night, Karl drifted on the cold water, clamped to his equipment barge.

The first sunset he had seen in five years was ferociously red. Red like an angry octopus. Red like Adaline's face when she screamed at Matt Richter.

And then the sky turned dark, full of "shooting stars", though no meteor storm was on Karl's calendar.

As he watched the embers dying in the sky, he combed Adaline his sad little formal reports on Little Adaline 623 and everything he had seen.

Over and over he asked her: Why didn't you answer me?

Did you just leave me here on this island — and then forget about me?



Karl performed some minor repairs — it was not yet time for a major

overhaul — and replenished himself with parts from his equipment barge. Some of the parts weren't functional, which was odd. Perhaps they had suffered an electrical storm while he was underwater?

Then he slipped back into the deeps, purposefully skirting the ruins of Ock City.

Nothing seemed better to him than getting away: five years of studying benthic basket stars and demersal dragonets.

As the time for his next check-in approached, he stopped by Ock City, on the off-chance that some of the octopuses might have survived.

This seemed unlikely.

But, to his surprise, some had!

He was relieved, but horrified by their condition.

Every live octopus had a serious genetic lesion or physical defect. Some were blind, or had malformed livers or gill hearts. Some had mutations in various protocadherins, proteins regulating the development of neurons. As a race, they were barely holding on.

Karl took an interest in a pretty little female octopus. She had low levels of hemocyanin, the copper-based protein in her blood. If an eel chased her, she would tire quickly and become easy prey. But her movements reminded him of Little Adaline 623, so he designated her Little Adaline 1969.

Just before Karl's check-in, 1969 went through puberty and took a mate.

She successfully laid eggs in her cave, though the number was pitifully small, only about a hundred.

What sorts of defects will her brood have? Karl wondered. Her mate had weak gills and was a poor swimmer.

And with her low levels of hemocyanin, would 1969 be able to protect them? Could she ward off an eel attack as Little Adaline 623 had done?

Karl would have to wait for an answer.

Again, he surfaced and commed Adaline, repeating his message a dozen times. His transmitters were functioning, as were his receivers.

He was just not getting a reply.

After the hundredth re-send, he decided to do something he had never done before.

He would go back to Hawaii, and see Adaline again, in person.

Conveniently, this would mean he would not have to witness 1969's attempts to protect her eggs. Or watch her die, and thus re-live Little Adaline 623's death.

He was going home.



Adaline had accompanied Karl on the research vessel that had taken him eight hundred miles across open sea from Hawaii to his little private island.

Then she literally cut the cord.

She probably assumed that he would stay in the general area of his island, but she had never ordered him to.

So he packed up his preserved specimens on his equipment barge and set sail for Hawaii. He was not designed for such a trip.

But he steeled himself with the words of Longfellow, who had written that only those who braved the ocean's dangers could comprehend its mysteries.

Indeed, it was a long and difficult trip.

During a sudden squall, some of the specimens washed off the barge. Luckily, as a submersible, Karl was able to retrieve them as they sank in the water.

Halfway to his goal, one of his propellers became entangled in seaweed. He wasn't able to fully clear it, only getting half-power. This meant that the prop on the other side had to be turned down, too, lest he go in circles. His trip now became much longer.

When he was almost to his goal, Karl was attacked by a black-tipped shark. He had exhausted his supply of cupric sulfate, but he remembered what Little Adaline 623 had done. He offered the shark his slurp gun. This it ate, and was satisfied, leaving him alone.

He would sacrifice bits of himself, but not his specimens and data.

These were the gifts he would lay at Adaline's feet.



His first clue that something was wrong was the silence of the ocean.

He heard no pings or underwater screws in the normal shipping lanes, though the calls of distant whales were surprisingly clear.

He saw no freighters or cruise ships, and there was an odd lack of light pollution.

When he reached the Hawaiian islands, he understood why.

He had hoped that the radiation at Ock City had been a localized phenomenon.

It was not.

All through his journey, he had passed through patches of poisoned, toxic waters. Not just on the surface, but in the deeper, twilight, mesopelagic zone.

Death was everywhere.

Honolulu Harbor was now a round, water-filled crater. It was rimmed with dead hotels and skyscrapers, stooped and windowless like blind lemmings tilting into the sea.

The remnants of naval bases were overrun by wild pigs, who nested in overturned, overgrown vans. Large dogs wandered the streets, the smaller ones having been eaten. The centipedes were enormous.

Poisonous winds were whipping up waters into curled cathedrals. They would have been the perfect Pipeline waves, if anyone were still alive to surf them.

And Dr. Franzen's labs at the University of Hawaii?

The outdoor tank where Karl had been activated and tested? Where Adaline had taught him underwater ballet and quoted Verne and Melville to him?

Gone, all gone, reclaimed by the ocean they were studying.

And now he realized that the meteors he had seen were not meteors.

They were satellites and space stations, falling from the sky.

And the fiery red sunset?

The beginning of nuclear winter.

Perhaps if Adaline had ever spoken about politics or history,

then Karl would have followed these studies on his own. But she had not. And so he had no speculations on the geopolitical causes for this destruction, no thoughts on what states or non-state actors might have fought in this war.

Clearly Hawaii was destroyed. But the rest of the world? The nearest lands — Japan, Indonesia, California — were thousands of miles away. He would never make it that far.

Millions, maybe tens of millions, maybe all the people on earth, were dead.

Karl had no way to know.

But he freely admitted to himself that, in the midst of such destruction, the only one he cared about was Adaline.

Oh, Adaline! he cried. Did you see the war coming? Did you remember that nuclear weapons cause electromagnetic pulses, and did you send me to the bottom of the ocean to protect me from them? Did you self-sacrifice for me?

But he refused to concede that she was dead.

There was no body. Maybe she had gone home to visit family in Colorado. Though her family lived near a military base, maybe she had survived...

Maybe...

He calculated a 0.4% chance that she was alive.

No, he thought. I am deluding myself. She has to be dead, and has been for a long time.

Otherwise, she would be alive and would have heard me cry out to her in love across the abyss of time. And she would have found a way to hear me, to cry back across the abyss.

She wouldn't have just left me alone on that island.

Would she have?



Karl's propellers spun, pushing him back toward his island, his equipment automatically measuring temp and turbidity, but he felt nothing but sadness. The shark bite had taken his slurp gun, leaving

only dangling wires and broken actuators. Eventually, he would cap the wires, but a hole would always remain.

By the time he arrived back at the island, he was nearly a wreck. His batteries were drained, his slip joints and shuttle valves clogged with corrosion. Only a major overhaul would put him right, if he could muster the willpower. He wanted to let himself go, saying goodbye to science, to the octopuses, to everything.

Then he realized he'd returned in time for the hatching of 1969's brood. He decided his last act would be to watch that, and then their mother's death.



As Karl waited outside 1969's lair, he wondered if he should take notes.

But who would read them? He had lost his guiding light, his partner in science.

A few days later, 1969's eggs hatched. When she ushered them into the world with gusts from her waterjet, Karl relived Little Adaline's death.

But 1969 didn't die.

A spiny lobster meandered by.

She killed and ate it.

1969 was unlike any female octopus ever seen. She must have stolen moments to eat, even while caring for her young. She did not self-sacrifice.

Something odd, even miraculous was happening. Again, the ocean was trying to relieve Karl's sorrow with her joys.

It worked for a few minutes.

When 1969 left her lair to hunt, Karl snuck in, sampling the water for traces of her proteins.

He discovered her secrets.

She had several mutations in her peptides. One was in the receptor for FMRF-amide, increasing its ability to restrain the reproductive urge. The other was in gonadotropin-releasing hormone, decreasing its ability to activate it.

As if she were riding the brake while lightly accelerating her sex drive. 1969 was fecund enough to reproduce — barely — but without the self-sacrificing instinct.

Nothing like this had ever been observed in octopuses before.

When 1969 started back toward her lair, Karl hustled away, surprised to see that she was not alone. Normally octopuses are solitary, even cannibalistic. 1969 was traipsing alongside four children.

They were followed at a distance by a conger eel.

But when the eel was still quite far off, 1969 clicked some stone chips together, three times. Though her children were poor swimmers, and she herself had thin blood, this gave them time to scamper to safety.

Karl had never seen such coordination between octopuses before.

Hurrah for them, he thought. Hurrah.

Adaline's death had stolen from him the joys of the wonders of the ocean. His grief blinded him to the implications of the octopuses discovering language.



Karl sprawled on the beach, partially disassembled, going through the motions of self-repair.

But if I mis-wire the control bus..., he thought, Or don't fully charge the batteries... Or damage the hold, so it leaks shark-attracting chum...

Any of a thousand mistakes would spell his doom.

Adaline could not come rescue him. No one could.

As he went through his checklist, he realized he had plenty of spares for everything, except one part that wasn't a part. His broken heart. But even for that, he found a workaround.

Karl collected his memories of his Hawaii trip onto a high density memory node in electronics sleeve III. He could solve all his problems, fixing himself by just smashing the node with a rock.

But he preferred a more poetic solution.

He could apply a little too much grease to the O-ring sealing

the sleeve — a glob instead of a smear. The blob would break off, allowing water in. Then the sea would wash away the pain, cleansing his soul, restoring the joys of creation.

He would be free.



As Karl re-distributed his memories, he thought again of the oddity that 1969 had not self-sacrificed.

He was staring at the answer to a question that had long puzzled him.

Octopuses were intelligent and dexterous. Why did they not rule the oceans?

Now he knew.

Octopus parents always died before or just after their young hatched. No knowledge ever passed from one generation to the next, so they could not progress up the ladder to civilization.

Until now.

That roadblock was removed, but another remained.

Each octopus — even 1969's children — had a collection of genetic defects. In a few generations, this line would peter out.

Unless someone uplifted them, the way that humanity had uplifted aurochs to milk cows, wolves to poodles, and simple machines to submersible robots.

Karl could selectively breed them, or do some small-scale bio-engineering, recreating an intact octopus that could progress.

But that would mean interfering.



Karl stared at the glob of grease on the tip of his finger, knowing that it would determine more than just his fate.

If he applied the glob, he would be free again to revel in the ocean's wonders, free from the pain of Adaline's death - but forever constrained by her commands, forever asking for permission that would never come.

If he wiped away the grease, he would condemn himself to an eternity of sadness. But he would be free, guided only by the consciousness she had given him.

He decided.

This would be his sacrifice. He would do what he thought was right.

He would not witness more death, but aid in the uplift of a race that would rule the planet.

He wiped away the grease.

He would love and remember Adaline.

Forever.



HOST COMMENTARY

By Mur Lafferty

There was so much to love about this story that I had trouble articulating it. It seems universal that if we create an AI capable of independent thought, it will inevitably fall in love with, or wish to kill, its creator. There's some oedipal stuff there that I don't feel like unpacking right now, but I admit to being a sucker for the stories of AIs breaking free of their programming, for better or for worse. The problem is, it's been done so often that you really need a fresh take to avoid treading the same tiresome ground.

That fresh take, apparently, involves a mama octopus with a fierce maternal instinct and the robot godfather she isn't aware of. It also involves a robot using its newly found independence to make a decision that doesn't primarily involve itself or its creator. This is a story of altruism and sacrifice. And that's pretty damn human if you ask me. Good humans, anyway.

It is the season of long nights, introspection, and also celebration and giving. (Northern Hemisphere, anyway. Southern Hemisphere folks, enjoy your summer!) We didn't choose this story as our holiday story; that comes next week with a special New Year's story from Sarah Pinsker. But it's probably no accident that my brilliant partner,

S.B. Divya, scheduled this for the solstice week, the longest night in the northern hemisphere, since this year especially we are dealing with a different feeling, with more introspection and less celebration than usual. We are dealing with more sacrifice, and the long nights seem longer than ever.

But what Frank Wu's story reminds us of is that sacrifice is not done without purpose, and the hope is that things will turn out for the better because of what we gave up. If you're avoiding family get-togethers this season, or even spending it alone because of precautions regarding the pandemic, I salute you. I join you in this sacrifice, as I'm spending the holiday with only my husband and daughter and a lot of video calls. It's a more somber holiday, but that's the choice we make, the decision on whether to fulfill the immediate need of wanting to get together with loved ones, or the long term need to stop the bug that has ground the world to a halt in this wretched year.

If you have traveled, please please be safe. Make good choices. Get tested if you can. If you haven't traveled and you're feeling alone and morose this week, know that we here at Escape Artists are with you. It feels alone, but you're not alone. Hop on social media, get into a chat on Discord, follow a livestream on Twitch or YouTube, remind yourself that there are a lot of people out there who are like you, and would love to talk about geeky stuff.

Take care. We'll get through this. Happy Holidays.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Frank Wu is a transdimensional interspace being, living physically near Boston with his wife Brianna the Magnificent, but regularly projecting his mind across time and space to commune with dinosaurs, octopuses, and numinous energy beings. Visualizations and written accounts of these journeys can be found in *Analog*, *Amazing Stories*, *Realms of Fantasy*, frankwu.com, and the radiation-hardened memory bunkers of planet Gorsplax.

ABOUT THE NARRATOR

After years of performing in theatre and online radio productions, Roderick Aust is applying his talents to the realm of audio books.

He started his journey in voice work in the US Air Force where he was a popular military broadcaster for American Forces Network in Europe. During the five years he served his country he wrote, edited, and voiced several radio commercials, news reports, and television segments. After that time he came home to Houston, Texas and continued to work in many areas of radio, TV, film, and stage. He has performed in plays across Houston, voiced characters, and also directed several old radio plays for irlonestar.com. Currently he can be found online reciting Shakespearean quotations with his friends on Zoom Shakespeare!

He loves this work and looks forward to any chance he gets to record a new story.

TRU LUV

By Sarah Pinsker

Escape Pod 765

December 31, 2020

Narrator : Mur Lafferty

Host : S.B. Divya

Audio Producer : Adam Pracht

Escape Pod 765: "Tru Luv" is an Escape Pod original.

The first three Tru fanatics were already waiting outside Meetspace when Molly arrived to open the bar. They were easy to recognize, pushing up their winter coats' sleeves and glancing at the insides of their wrists every two seconds instead of their phones, each hoping for their algorithm-matched Prince or Princess or Princex to cross into range and light up their implant.

For all that Molly thought the implants were a scam, she appreciated that they broke people of obsessive phone-checking, at least a tiny bit. It was actually part of the marketing pitch: "Put your phone away and make a commitment. This isn't social media; it's Tru Luv." She was still amazed that so many had taken them up on it, but, then again, she hadn't gotten into bartending for her ability to understand people.

"Your group isn't even supposed to be here until seven thirty," Molly told them. "And we don't open until six tonight."

"It IS six," the tall one said.

Crap. Molly checked her own old-school watch, still on her wrist, but destined for her pocket so she wouldn't accidentally soak it when she washed glasses. Most nights her phone stayed hooked to the bar's ancient speakers, and she still liked to be able to check the time. Except she hadn't actually looked at it when she put it on that evening, and the hands had frozen in a V around 10:12. She couldn't remember the last time she'd changed the battery.

She swore under her breath and slid it off her wrist. Checked her phone instead, which did indeed read six. Six oh five, to be exact. She'd have been on time if she hadn't stopped to take a picture of a vacant rowhouse. The first-floor window had been boarded up the previous times she'd walked past, but this time the board was gone, revealing that there was no building behind the façade at all, just crumbling brick and magnificent decay. The shot she composed included the window and the greenery creeping through the foundation, like a glimpse into a terrarium. She loved that unguarded moment where character revealed itself, whether on buildings or faces.

She'd turned away, satisfied, to discover two middle-aged frat-boy-looking white guys staring at her. One held up a glowing wrist, and said, "Is it you, baby? Don't make me face the new year alone."

She held up her bare wrist, then swiveled her hand to give him the finger. A polite ask was one thing, but she was nobody's baby. She started walking away, and they walked in the same direction. The block before the bar, she ducked into the corner pharmacy and pretended to browse the candy and bargain bins until they walked on; she didn't want them getting ideas about coming into her bar to drink. That was the worst part of the implant fad for her: all the people who felt entitled to your time and personal space under the assumption everyone was looking for the same thing they were. It was annoying and it had made her late.

At least she hadn't inconvenienced anyone except these three early customers, all of whom probably needed to learn to slow down a little. She didn't know them, but Molly found that to be the case with most people, especially on New Year's Eve. Everyone always seemed so desperate for something significant to go down; she wished they'd see it was just another night. If you wanted to make

a change in your life, you could take steps toward it any time. You didn't have to wait for this one arbitrary date to roll around again.

"Come on in," she said.

They had to stand awkwardly against the wall while Molly took the stools off the bar and the chairs off the tables. Angus had closed the night before, and he'd left her with dirty glasses and a full garbage can. She took her time hauling the garbage out to the dumpster and setting up the sinks, grumbling the whole way. Angus generally left things neat, so something must have gone wrong for him to abandon a mess.

The early birds chose a table opposite the bar. One flicked at a spot in front of her, which suggested maybe Angus hadn't wiped those tables before putting up the chairs. From the look they were giving the whole place, they were probably rethinking their plan to spend New Year's Eve — even early New Year's Eve — at a grungy neighborhood dive bar. If the Tru Luv event organizers brought party glitz, there would be party glitz. Otherwise, the decorations were the standing art show of Molly's photos of deserted houses and bar regulars. Her photos classed the place up most days, but they weren't exactly festive, or, rather, they didn't fall into the societally-approved list of holiday slash party decorations.

As far as she was concerned, they were decoration enough. She'd had shows at galleries around town, too, but she didn't like the way people analyzed them in those spaces, like they were a critique of their subjects. Here, people recognized them for the celebration of survival that they were meant to be. When she'd asked her boss to let her put them up in place of the neon beer signs, it hadn't been meant as a permanent installation, but they'd gradually become part of the bar's identity. It made her happy; she'd rather work here forever, asking people with interesting faces if she could take their picture, selling the occasional portrait, than take glamour shots of perfect brides and babies.

Molly approached the occupied table and gave it a casual swipe with a cloth. "Okay, y'all. Sorry for the wait. What can I get you?"

The tall woman ordered the IPA on tap; one of her friends got a cranberry juice, and the other a gin and tonic. Meetspace wasn't really a cocktail bar, and Molly wasn't exactly a trained mixologist,

but she could handle making drinks that had the ingredients embedded in the name.

“Why so early?” she asked as she poured the beer and the juice, then reached for the gin.

The tall one stood and transferred her friends’ drinks to their table, saving Molly the trouble of coming around the bar, which Molly appreciated. “We all got our implants three weeks ago, so this is the first Tru Luv event we’ve gotten to attend. ‘Ring in the new year with your new Tru Luv’ the ad said. We wanted to be here early enough to scope the place out, have a drink, get nerves out of the way...”

That made sense, even if it did make prep more difficult for her. Not their fault, she supposed, since she’d been late.

The door chimed, and Dr. Damien ducked in from the cold. All three women looked to the door and then to their wrists. What a funny world, where their wrists told him he wasn’t worth more of their time, despite his great smile.

Molly waved. Dr. Damien had moved into the neighborhood a few months before for his residency at the teaching hospital downtown, and was fast becoming a fixture. Usually she waited until someone had been around a while, but she’d asked to take his picture on his very first visit to the bar, when he’d stumbled in from a long shift. His photo, on the back wall, showed a face filled with weary bemusement. It was one of her favorites.

Molly reached for a stout glass and started the pour, and he smiled as he shrugged off his jacket and hung it on the hook in front of his knees. Some people resented it when you knew what they wanted before they said so, but most regulars liked the familiarity.

“Just to warn you, there’s an event going on for the next few hours,” she said, slapping down a coaster and then his drink.

“Private? Do I have to leave?”

“I don’t think they’d care if you’re sitting at the bar. You don’t have one of those implants, do you? Then you’d fit in.”

He shook his head. When he held up the glowing bracelet on his wrist, the three women at the table behind him immediately shifted their focus. The problem with a bar this small was that there was really no such thing as a private conversation.

“What’s that one like? My mother suggested I get one of those instead of the implant, but I said I needed to go all in.” The blond pointed to Dr. Damien’s cheap alternative to their implants. The heart-shaped LED in the doctor’s bracelet maintained a bright, steady glow, indicating he’d spent significant time in the presence of the matching signal.

The Lurrvv bracelet involved less burden than the implants — cheaper, no surgery— which some people said defeated the purpose. Tru Luv’s sales pitch claimed you needed the commitment of an implant to get the most out of their matchmaking. They’d clearly won the consumer loyalty war already; Lurrvv had declared bankruptcy a month before. Lately Molly had been seeing them in the markdown bins at stores.

Dr. Damien smiled. “I’m happy. I found what I was looking for. The Lurrvv brand is a little different from yours, though. You buy two and set them once you’ve already got someone for the second one, and the glow gets brighter the more time you spend together. It doesn’t help do the actual matching like yours.”

“What’s the difference between that and a wedding ring, then?”

“Aside from the glowing? It’s not a marriage. You can define it however you’d like. As far as I’m concerned, mine tells people I’ve got someone at home that makes me happy.”

They all smiled nervously and looked at each other. His answer had been generic, but truthful, and as a bonus, let them see he wasn’t much for talking about himself. Molly liked that about him; she hadn’t gotten into bartending to be anyone’s best friend. She’d listen as long as customers wanted to chat at her, and maybe even offer a little advice or sympathy, but it was not a two-way street.

The women raised a toast to the doctor and returned to talking amongst themselves.

“Sorry about the interrogation, Doc,” Molly said, getting to work on the glasses Angus had left in the sink. She’d heard Tru Luv events could get hectic, so she wanted to start with everything clean.

“It’s okay,” he said. “Honestly, I wear it to keep that whole Tru Luv crowd at bay. You can’t even imagine what it’s like when somebody’s implant lights up in the ER waiting room. They all want it to be one of the doctors, not the person next to them with the vomit

bucket. But if the algorithm says that's your person, what can you do, right?"

She nodded and moved on to logging into the cash register and entering the women's orders. She'd been lazy; she should have asked them for credit cards to start tabs, especially since they were strangers, and it was New Year's, when people ended up too drunk to remember to pay. She was about to ask when she noticed an apology note next to the cash register. It read, "Sorry Molly had to run Jack P to the ER split his head SORRY!!!"

The second "SORRY!!!" with its collection of exclamation points made her think he was apologizing for more than the dirty glasses. She did a quick tour, which was how she found the pool of congealed blood in one of the two single-stall bathrooms, below the paper-towel dispenser. Jack Powell was a regular, differentiated from Jack Brennan and Jack Toomey by his firm commitment to rail whiskey. Powell was her favorite Jack, and she hoped he was okay; he'd lost a lot of blood. It looked like maybe he'd lost his balance pissing, judging from the other forensic evidence.

She did a quick bleach-mop, wishing it was below her pay grade, or that there was someone else she could order to do it. On another night she'd have just duct taped a handwritten "Out of Order" sign to the door, but she supposed there should be two functioning bathrooms on New Year's Eve with a private party.

The first organizer arrived half an hour before his event was due to begin, carrying a box overflowing with tinsel; it looked like silver tentacles trying to escape. He called, "Hi, I'm Marcus!" in Molly's direction and started tossing decorations around the room in a way that seemed haphazard but somehow worked. She thought his speed was due to the guests already straggling in, but when his co-organizer, Stephanie, arrived six minutes later, Molly realized he'd wanted to make Stephanie think he'd been there a while.

"Where have you been?" Marcus asked. "We're supposed to start soon! And have you seen how small this place is? Did you pick this dive just for the name?"

Stephanie entered carrying an enormous tray of crudité with a smaller tray of chocolate-dipped strawberries balanced on top of it.

She only answered his first question. "All the registers at the supermarket were malfunctioning."

He took the veggie tray and slid it onto the nearest table, still grumbling. Molly had lost sympathy for him when he'd disparaged Meetspace. Yes, it was a dive. It was a neighborhood bar, not a club or event hall.

"He barely beat you here," Molly whispered to Stephanie while Marcus wrestled with the plastic that covered the food.

"I know," Stephanie whispered back. "I track his phone."

Molly automatically glanced down at Stephanie's wrist, but her implant wasn't glowing. Stephanie and Marcus must be friends, or co-workers, or something other than algorithm-dictated true loves. That was a relief. She didn't like the idea of a relationship built on lies.

The bar had started to fill up, and Molly busied herself starting tabs and pouring drinks. She didn't get a breather until Marcus stood on a chair. Meetspace normally frowned on chair-standing, but he wasn't drunk so she allowed it; it meant everyone stopped ordering and drinking and turned their attention his way.

"Welcome to the official New Year's Eve Tru Luv event! Welcome back if you've hung out with us before, here or in any of the forty-six other cities that now have sanctioned Tru Luv events."

He paused for scattered applause, then continued. "I'm sure some of you have already looked at your wrists. If you're seeing a blinking light, you're probably eager to get chatting. If not, fear not. Think of it as an opportunity. You can still meet some awesome people...and remember, your Tru Luv is out there!"

He hopped off the chair, and he and Stephanie both moved into the crowd to chat. Molly was surprised they didn't offer icebreakers or games or something to make it less awkward, or to keep people engaged if they weren't already seeing the first stirrings of Tru Luv.

She scanned the busy bar, looking for anyone who looked like they'd made a connection. The tall woman who'd arrived early was jabbing at her wrist excitedly while her friends made similarly excited noises. Several people were holding their hands above their heads like eager schoolchildren, trying to tell the room they had a ping. She reached under the cash register for her camera and took

a couple of quick, subtle shots, trying to do it without them seeing her. The expressions on their faces were a fascinating mix of eager, hopeful, disappointed, resigned.

“Molly, love, can I trouble you for a drink?”

She hadn’t seen Jack P come in, but he’d managed to part the crowd and make it to his favorite stool. The crowd-parting may have been made easier by the giant bandage he wore around his head which, combined with his ancient military overcoat, made him look like an extra from *Les Miz*.

“That depends,” she said. “Concussion or laceration? Are you sure you’re okay to drink?”

“Twelve stitches in my forehead, no concussion. Scout’s honor.”

She poured his rail whiskey, and gave an extra splash out of sympathy for the cut.

“Sorry for the crowd,” she said.

He flicked a wrist to dismiss the apology, and she spotted the pale heart implant beneath his skin.

“When’d you get that, Jack?”

“A few months ago. Figured it was worth a shot. Odds are as good as anything.”

“Are they?”

“If you pay for the local package. Local costs more, but it’s not going to do me any good if I’m matched with a guy who lives a thousand miles away. If they do a good job matching, he’ll be as reluctant to move as I am.” Jack owned a house around the corner, stuffed floor to ceiling with art, including four of her photos. She’d only been in his place once, to walk him home when he was too drunk to get there on his own, but what she’d seen of his collection told her he had pretty excellent taste. Yet another reason he was her favorite Jack.

“Any luck so far?”

“It glowed once at Artbazaar, but there were thirty thousand people walking around that day. I paid for a quick one-time upgrade to narrow the focus to twenty feet — I normally pay for a one-mile radius — but I never found my mystery man.” He sighed dramatically, punctuating the sigh with whiskey. “And then last night, of course, I was relieving myself when I noticed it was blinking again.

In my haste to leave the restroom, I tripped over my own shoelace and split my forehead on the paper-towel crank. I tried to go after him, my mystery man, but Angus insisted on taking me to the hospital.”

That explained the bathroom. Molly poured him another.

She had to admit Tru Luv had figured out a good system. Pay for an implant. Pay for a local package, so you know that the person is in the bar and not in another bar ten blocks or ten miles away. Pay for more granular choices. Search for the person whose implant signal was matched to yours by the patented Tru Luv algorithm. Pay for a restart if the two of you don't hit it off, though they encouraged you to look beyond first impressions. Each successive try was more expensive, which she thought was counterintuitive, but probably did encourage people not to dismiss the matches without at least trying first.

She had another question for him. “So are you here for the event tonight, or just your usual?”

“Usual. I mean, if it starts to flash I'm not going to ignore it, but I'm not exactly going to make a good impression today.” He gestured at his bandage.

The tall woman was aggressively talking her way around the room, trying to find the person who made her implant-heart beat faster. A few people stood staring after her, having been chatted up and discarded in a matter of seconds.

Molly wasn't sure that was the way to go. What if it took a minute to acknowledge the right person, and in that time, you'd been rude to their best friend? No sense being a jerk to anyone who hadn't been a jerk first. Or maybe that was her years in the service industry talking.

Something about these implants seemed to give people permission to be rude, though. At least three people grabbed her wrist while she was clearing glasses, trying to get a look at it. If there had been a fourth she would have punched someone. Why couldn't people get that they didn't have permission to touch her?

The tall woman and a guy in an ironic bolo tie and a nineties goatee had locked eyes across the room. She didn't look quite as enthusiastic as she had when she'd been blazing through people a

minute before, but they were holding their wrists up to each other and smiling shyly. The algorithm wouldn't lie. Now it was up to them to determine where to take this.

The guy stepped over to the bar and ordered two IPAs. They retired to the corner table, where they spoke in whispers and every once in a while clinked glasses. Another successful Tru Luv match. Maybe.

The energy in the bar had shifted toward the potential couple, reorienting so everyone was pretending not to watch them while watching them. There were no other shouts of joy, no other aggressive searches. Nobody chatted much outside their friend groups now, since the algorithm had spoken. Why bother getting to know each other if Tru Luv said your match was elsewhere?

A few people settled their tabs and left for more exciting New Years' parties, while others bellied up to the bar to drown their sorrows alongside Jack P and Dr. Damien.

Only the two in the corner looked like they were making a true night of it. The woman still looked somewhat skeptical, but she was clearly trying. At least they hadn't disappeared into the one working bathroom to make out.

Around eleven, the guy stood, kissed the woman on the cheek, and left.

"Well?" Marcus the organizer, still at the table with the crudité, didn't even wait for the door to close before crossing the room to ask. Molly was glad, since she wondered as well.

The woman shrugged. "He seems nice. We did have a lot in common. The algorithm knows what it's doing, I guess."

"But no New Year kiss?"

"He said he had to make an appearance at another party, and he didn't want to rush me."

"Will you be seeing each other again?"

"I think so. He said to text him to let him know I got home safely tonight, so I'll do that. Maybe it'll turn into something."

That wasn't the most enthusiastic endorsement, but it wasn't a rejection. Marcus looked almost more excited at the news than the woman herself. He was clearly one of the big fans, the true believers in Tru Luv, the ones who considered this the new frontier of

matchmaking. He would leave thinking he had made a difference in two lives tonight with his little meet-and-greet, even if the majority of the attendees had walked away disappointed.

After he left, the woman lingered near Dr. Damien another moment. "You said earlier: you're happy?"

The doctor looked like he was about to explain, then decided this wasn't the time. "I'm very happy," he said.

Jack P coughed like he was trying to hide that he found that funny, but the woman didn't notice. She and her friends left a minute later, deep in discussion about whether to try getting into a dance club or go home. They didn't want to start the new year in a dive like this. Molly wanted to take their picture at that moment, with varying degrees of enthusiasm and exhaustion and hope and disappointment moving across their faces, but in the time it took her to grab her camera, their plans solidified and their expressions changed.

As soon as they left, Jack turned to the doctor. "You could've told her that your second bracelet is on your cat's collar."

Damien grinned. "She asked if I'm happy. I'm happy. I don't need a relationship during my residency. Cats are way less trouble."

The bar was empty now except a couple of regulars and the last lingering Tru Luvs. Everyone had an idea of what it meant to turn over the new year in a bar like this. Molly had a thought. "Hey, Doc, would you watch the bar for two minutes? I have to duck out for a sec."

He nodded and waved her out. The temperature had dropped, and the street was empty; this close to midnight everyone was probably where they planned to be. The pharmacy was empty too, and it was easy enough to grab what she wanted.

The night clerk, Ben, looked up in surprise when she arrived at the counter. "You close early, Molly?" They'd been friendly since she'd asked to take his picture a year or so before; he liked to bring friends to the bar to see it.

"No, I needed to grab this quick."

He nodded. Pharmacy clerks knew better than to comment on purchases, let alone strange close-to-midnight New Year's Eve purchases. He rang her up, they wished each other a happy new year, and she ran back to the bar. One Tru fan was waiting impatiently

to get her credit card back, but otherwise Molly hadn't been missed. She was back in place in time to turn on their one tiny television for the countdown, and made a show of cheering with everyone at the start of something new. Anyone expecting more fanfare was at the wrong bar.

Nobody lingered long after the calendar ticked over, and by one she'd managed to get everyone out the door and to leave the place a little cleaner than Angus had. No more bathroom disasters, no broken glasses or spills. Nobody ran out on their tabs, nobody gave a particularly noteworthy tip, nobody made any declarations of love. A night like most, other than the Tru Luv interlude.

She used a rideshare app rather than risk walking home alone late. The driver's Tru Luv implant glowed steady and he had a laminated picture of a baby dangling from his rearview mirror. Another happy customer. He didn't talk to her; maybe he knew that bartenders heading home had usually reached their fill of conversation by this time of night.

As she rode, she fumbled with the packaging on her purchase, stuffing the shrink wrap and the pink "50% OFF" sticker into her pocket, and ripping open the box with the twinned Lurrrvv bracelets. She strapped one to her wrist, where her dead watch had been, then reached into her bag and threaded the other through the strap loop on her camera. When she turned them on and held them close to each other, they both glowed dimly; they'd grow brighter over time.

The car stopped at a red light near a dance club, revelers spilling out onto the street singly, in groups, in pairs. She loved them all: the drunk, unguarded faces. Molly lowered her window and aimed her camera, waiting for someone to pass closer, waiting for the right moment, for something pure and true that she could capture and preserve.

HOST COMMENTARY

by S.B. Divya

This is our final episode of 2020. It's been a year, hasn't it? I suspect

that for most you - and definitely for me - there has been no year like this in our lifetimes, and I really hope there isn't one again.

A lot of science fiction likes to show how terrible people can be during an apocalyptic disaster, but the reality is quite the opposite. As Rebecca Solnit wrote in her book, "A Paradise Built in Hell," "A disaster is a lot like a revolution when it comes to disruption and improvisation, to new roles and an unnerving or exhilarating sense that now anything is possible."

2020 has been that kind of disaster. In the Western world, we've learned to embrace wearing masks and washing our hands a lot. Globally, we've come together on Zoom and Google Meet, Slack and Discord. We've lit candles and banged on pots to show our support to healthcare workers. We've sung opera from balconies and played drums from the back of pickup trucks.

In the midst of tragedy - and that word certainly applies to the situation where I am right now, in Southern California - we've found new ways to connect and stay human. We've relearned math and grammar with our children. We've delivered meals to older friends and family. We've had weddings and given birth and attended funeral. We've mourned through screens. Said last words via cell phones. I've done those two personally.

We've cultivated new ways to find solace. Rather than dinner parties or nights out, we bake bread. We garden. We rediscover long neglected musical instruments or dusty boxes of paint. We pick up a book. Or a camera.

Sarah's story embodies this spirit. That we crave connection with our fellow human beings, but we also find great satisfaction through expressions of our own creativity. Her main character Molly bridges the two with her portraits, one of the most intimate and powerful forms of photography.

Sarah has this to say about it: "I once worked at a bar not unlike the one in this story, and I have mad respect for a good bartender's skills. I'm fascinated by the trust people place in algorithms, and the way just about anything can be gamified. I didn't push this technology all the way to its extreme the way I sometimes do, but I wanted to explore the idea of a company that convinced people that they were the ultimate matchmakers."

2020 has accelerated our adoption of technology. It's given Silicon Valley even more access to our lives and our data. It's forced the transition to telework and distance learning. And to top that off, we're relying more and more on algorithms and machine intelligence to make big decisions.

I've seen a lot of conversations happening in this space. On the ethical use of data and A.I. On the pitfalls of algorithmic decisions and how they can reinforce social biases - like the idea that a person who's single must be in want of true love. As one of the most fundamental emotions of the animal kingdom, love can take many forms and have many different objects.

I hope that the new year brings you an abundance of love. For your family and friends. For your pets. For our frontline workers. For science and music and art. But most of all, I hope you give yourself some love because you're worth it.

Happy New Year.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sarah Pinsker's fiction has won the Nebula, Sturgeon, and Philip K. Dick Awards, and she has been a finalist for the Hugo, World Fantasy, and other awards. Her first collection, *Sooner or Later Everything Falls Into the Sea* (Small Beer Press) and her first novel, *Song For A New Day* (Berkley), were published in 2019. She is also a singer/songwriter with three albums and another forthcoming. She lives in Baltimore with her wife and dog.

ABOUT THE NARRATOR

Mur Lafferty is the co-editor and sometime-host of *Escape Pod*.

She is an American podcaster and writer based in Durham, North Carolina. She is the host and creator of the podcasts *I Should Be Writing* and *Ditch Diggers*. Her books have been nominated for the Hugo, Nebula, Philip K. Dick, and Scribe Awards. In the past decade she has been: co-founder/co-editor of *Pseudopod*, founder

of Mothership Zeta, editor or co-editor of Escape Pod (where she is currently).

She is fond of Escape Artists, in other words.

Mur is the 2013 winner of the Astounding Award for Best New Writer (formerly the John W. Campbell Award).

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 and Astounding Award winner Mur Lafferty, and Hugo 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.

Escape Pod is a show for science fiction fans. If you enjoyed the samples in this Hugo packet, we suggest heading to our new listeners page for a selection of our favorite stories from our entire catalog.

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ESCAPE POD STAFF

CO-EDITOR: S.B. Divya (any pronouns)

S.B. Divya is a lover of science, math, fiction, and the Oxford comma. She has been part of the Escape Pod crew in various capacities since 2015. Divya is the Hugo and Nebula nominated author of *Machinehood* (Saga), *Runtime* (tordotcom), and the short story collection, *Contingency Plans For the Apocalypse and Other Situations* (Hachette India).

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 or on Twitter @divyastweets.

CO-EDITOR: Mur Lafferty (she/her)

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 Award winner for Best Fancast, and the author of the science fiction murder mystery *Six Wakes*, out from Orbit.

ASSISTANT EDITOR: Benjamin C. Kinney (he/him)

Benjamin C. Kinney is an itinerant neuroscientist with a frozen New England heart, though nowadays he lives in St. Louis with three cats and his Martian wife. He no longer creates cyborg monkeys, after too many nights delivering them Prozac. His short stories have appeared in *Strange Horizons*, *Diabolical Plots*, *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, and more. You can find him online at benjaminckinney.com or follow him on twitter @BenCKinney.

He swears this is all true, even the monkeys and the Martians.

HOST: Tina Connolly (she/her)

Tina Connolly's books include the *Ironskin* and *Seriously Wicked* series, and the collection *On the Eyeball Floor*. She has been a finalist for the Hugo, Nebula, and World Fantasy awards. She co-hosts *Escape Pod*, runs the *Toasted Cake* podcast, and is at tinaconnolly.com.

HOST: Alasdair Stuart (he/him)

Alasdair Stuart is a professional enthusiast, pop culture analyst, and writer. He is a Hugo Finalist for Best Fan Writer, and a British Fantasy Society Best Non-fiction finalist for his weekly pop culture newsletter *The Full Lid*.

His nonfiction can be found at numerous genre and pop culture venues, including regular columns at the Hugo Award-winning *Ditch Diggers* and Fox Spirit Books. His game writing includes ENie-nominated work on the *Doctor Who RPG* and *After The War* from *Genesis of Legend*.

He co-owns the *Escape Artists Podcast Network* and hosts their horror podcast, *PseudoPod*, along with the Hugo Award nominated science fiction podcast, *Escape Pod*. He is a frequent guest

and presenter on podcasts, with voice acting credits including the 2019 AudioVerse Award-winning *The Magnus Archives*.

His second collection of expanded essays from *PseudoPod*, *The PseudoPod Tapes Volume 2: Approach with Caution*, is available from Fox Spirit Books.

A frequent awards judge including the Arthur C. Clarke, The Kitschies, Brave New Words and the BFS, he blogs at www.alasdairstuart.com and is on Twitter @AlasdairStuart.

AUDIO PRODUCER: Adam Pracht

Adam Pracht lives in Kansas, but asks that you not hold that against him. 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.

AUDIO PRODUCER: Summer Brooks

Summer Brooks is a story addict who watches way too much television. She enjoys putting her encyclopedic knowledge to the test during discussions and interviews about scifi, horror and comics, and does so as the longtime host and producer of *Slice of SciFi*, and as co-host of *The Babylon Podcast*.

Summer also does voiceovers & narrations for *Tales to Terrify*, *StarShipSofa* and *Escape Pod*, among others, and is an avid reader and writer of science fiction, fantasy and thrillers, with a handful of

publishing credits to her name. Next on her agenda is writing an urban fantasy tale, and a monster movie creature feature or two.

ASSOCIATE EDITOR: Sandy Parsons (she/her)

Sandy writes literary, philosophical, humorous, and speculative fiction. She has degrees in physics, math, molecular biophysics, and medical science, but only ponders the mathematical nature of reality for fun these days. Also for fun, she plays video games, hikes and watches Rick and Morty with her family.

When not writing, Sandy works as an anesthetist in Georgia and cares for three geriatric cats. Her website is sandyparsons.com.

ASSOCIATE EDITOR: Darusha Wehm (they/them)

M. Darusha Wehm is the Nebula Award-nominated and Sir Julius Vogel Award winning author of the interactive fiction game *The Martian Job*, as well as thirteen novels, several poems, and many short stories. Originally from Canada, Darusha lives in Wellington, New Zealand after spending several years sailing the Pacific. They tweet [@darusha](https://twitter.com/darusha) and their website is darusha.ca.

**ASSOCIATE EDITOR & SOCIAL MEDIA MANAGER:
Premea Mohamed (she/her)**

Premea Mohamed is an Indo-Caribbean scientist and spec fic writer based in Canada. Her debut novel, *'Beneath the Rising'* is out now from Solaris Books and her short fiction has appeared in a variety of venues. She can be found on Twitter at [@premeesaurus](https://twitter.com/premeesaurus).

ASSOCIATE EDITOR: Kevin Wabaunsee (he/him)

Kevin Wabaunsee is a speculative fiction writer living in Chicago. A former newspaper reporter on the health and medical beat, he is currently an editor and communications director for a large medical school. He is a Prairie Band Potawatomi.

ASSOCIATE EDITOR: Phoebe Barton (she/her)

Phoebe Barton is a queer trans science fiction writer. Her short fiction has appeared in venues such as *Analog*, *On Spec*, and multiple anthologies. When not writing she focuses on her obsession with rail-based public transportation, occasional reviews of forgotten short speculative fiction works, and thriving in an indifferent cosmos.

She lives with a robot in the sky above Toronto and can be found at www.phoebebartonsf.com or on Twitter at @aphoebebarton.

ASSOCIATE EDITOR: J. M. Coster (she/her)

J.M. Coster (Jen) is an erstwhile MD turned speculative fiction writer and editor. She co-produces the game dev comedy podcast *Coffee with Butterscotch* and co-hosts the medicine in movies podcast *Docs Watch*. Currently, Jen lives in St. Louis, MO with her robomancer husband and recalcitrant cats. She likes creepy fairy tales, making robots do her work, and thinks ghost stories and food stories are not so dissimilar. She occasionally tweets at @jcalyst.

ASSOCIATE EDITOR: Shiv Ramdas (he/him)

Shiv Ramdas is an Indian reader and writer of speculative fiction.

He has written short stories, radio scripts and plays, advertisements, and numerous resignation letters. His short fiction has (or will shortly) appear in Fireside, Podcastle, Strange Horizons and other venues. He currently lives in Seattle with a spouse, 3 cats and a very demanding tree.

ASSOCIATE EDITOR: Karlo Yeager Rodriguez (he/him)

Karlo Yeager Rodriguez is originally from the enchanting island of Puerto Rico, but moved to Baltimore some years back. His stories have appeared in *Nature Futures*, *Galaxy's Edge* and several other venues.

He lives happily among the rolling hills of rural Maryland with his partner and one very odd dog. To read Karlo's sporadic posts, go to alineofink.com

ASSOCIATE EDITOR: Jay Bhat (she/her)

Jay Bhat is a speculative fiction writer who lives in a quiet, green town with her spouse (who is often forced to read her first drafts. He is learning to say no.) She would love to have a feline familiar if she wasn't so terribly allergic to them.

Meanwhile, she is rooting for small dragons in spaceships. Someday. She can be found at www.jaybhat.net or on Twitter @_jaybhat.

ASSOCIATE EDITOR: Justin C. Key (he/him)

Justin C. Key is a speculative fiction writer, psychiatrist, and a graduate of Clarion West 2015. His short stories have appeared in *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, *Strange Horizons*, *Tor.com*, *Escape Pod*, and *Interstellar Flight Magazine*. He is currently

working on a near-future novel inspired by his medical training. His horror novella, *Spider King*, is available now from Serial Box.

When Justin isn't writing, working in the hospital, or exploring Los Angeles with his wife, he's chasing after his two young (and energetic!) sons and marveling over his newborn daughter. You can follow his journey at justinkey.com and @JustinKey_MD on Twitter.

ASSOCIATE EDITOR: Langley Hyde (she/her)

Langley Hyde's short stories have appeared in *If This Goes On*, *Unidentified Funny Objects* (vol. 6 & 7), *Podcastle*, *Terraform*, and more. Her debut novel, *Highfell Grimoires*, was named a Best Book of 2014 in SF/Fantasy/Horror by *Publishers Weekly*.

Currently, Langley Hyde lives in the Pacific Northwest along with her partners and her two children.

ASSOCIATE EDITOR: Matthew Olivas (he/him)

Matthew Olivas is a Hispanic Science Fiction and Fantasy writer and member of the 2021 Clarion class who watches movies more than he reads books, but don't worry he's working on it. While currently only published in small literary magazines, he currently devotes his free time into completing his first novel.

Matt loves horror, creatures, monsters and anything Other. And probably spends too much time on Twitter talking about Transformers. #GhostClass

ASSOCIATE EDITOR: Marcus Tsong (he/him)

Marcus Tsong is a longtime Dungeon Master and faithful servant of

the Fantasy and Horror Genre Gods. He has lived in Seattle, Boise, San Francisco, Madison, Portland OR, Shanghai, Brooklyn, and is aware this sounds like a Huey Lewis song. Currently he is working on a doorstep sized fantasy novel, and a collection of weird fiction.

He also moderates a novel writing workshop for the Brooklyn Speculative Fiction Writers Meetup group, and his story “Knowing You, Knowing Me” is available in Season One of BSFW’s podcast, the Kaleidocast.

2020 ASSOCIATE EDITOR ALUMNI

S. Kay Nash

S. Kay Nash is a writer, editor, and occasional narrator. Raised by a cabal of university professors, anthropologists, and irritated librarians, she holds two degrees as magical wards to protect her from being hauled back into the ivory tower. Her short fiction has appeared in several anthologies including *Road Kill: Texas Horror by Texas writers*, volume 2.

She lives in Texas with a Mad Scientist and a peaceful contingent of cats and dogs. You can find her on Twitter @Gnashchick.

J.R. Dawson

Dawson has been published in F&SF, DSF, Escape Pod, and has a forthcoming story in *Lightspeed* in 2020. She lives in Omaha with her spouse and three dogs, where she works for The Rose Theater and Nebraska Writers Collective. She’s currently working with the Institute for Holocaust Education and Circle Theatre on a new play, “When We Go Away.”

Ryan Boyd

Ryan Boyd is an editor, writer, and slushie enthusiast who lives in Los Angeles. Their work has been published in *The Hundreds*, *CLASH*, *Literary Orphans*, *Leveler*, *Blast Furnace*, *Rust+Moth*, and a slew of other tiny-yet-gutsy presses. They once commandeered the blog on *Ultimate Coupons* to write too many articles about Tom Waits, and they also co-host the podcast *Rank & Vile*, which is honest-to-God ranking every horror movie ever made.

Give them trouble on Twitter @ryandroyd, where they mostly tweet about slasher movies and *Golden Girls*. They never sleep.

Izzy Wasserstein

Izzy Wasserstein is a queer, trans woman. She teaches writing and literature, writes poetry and fiction, and shares a home with a variety of animal companions and the writer Nora E. Derrington. Her fiction has appeared in *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, *Clarquesworld*, *Fantasy*, and elsewhere. Her most recent poetry collection is *When Creation Falls* (Meadowlark Books, 2018).

James Beamon

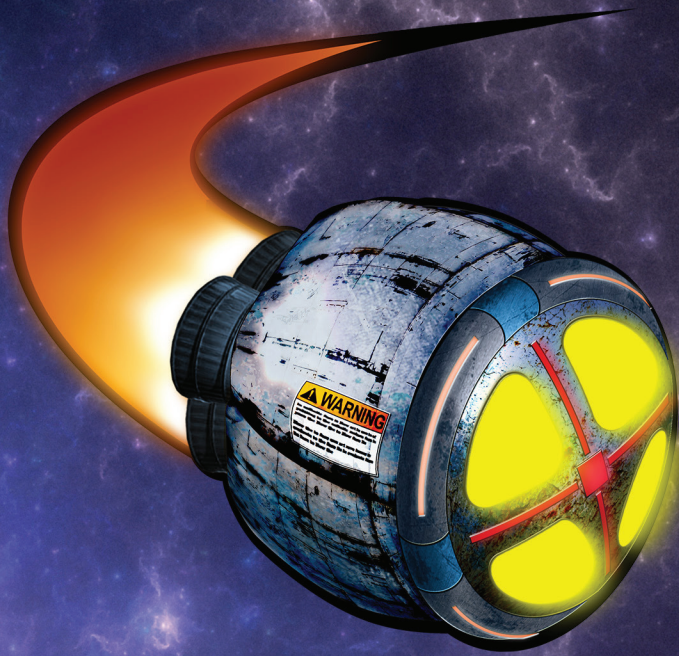
James Beamon discovered awhile back that if he wrote down some of the stuff he randomly makes up all the time, people might print it. It's been a semi-charmed life ever since with his stories popping up at *F&SF*, *Apex Magazine*, *Daily Science Fiction* and a slew, or maybe a half slew, of others. An Air Force veteran who's deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan, James now lives in Virginia with his wife, son and a cat who thinks his part-time job is alarm clock, even on weekends. Especially on weekends.

LP Kindred

LP Kindred is a Chicagoan-Angelino who writes SpecFic from the intersections of Black and Gay. When not avoiding novel drafting or short story revision or reading fiction or planning a series, he's trying to sleep or asking "at what temperature would you like your steak?" His fiction is featured or forthcoming in Fiyah Literary Magazine and Speculative City; is/will be an alum of Hurston-Wright, VONA, and Clarion. #GhostClass

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