

SCIENCE FICTION STORIES AND MORE

SEP-OCT 2021

DARK MATTER

MAGAZINE



RENAN BERNARDO
OLHA BONDARENKO
CHRISTOPHER ANTHONY
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THOMAS HA
JANELLE JANSON
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NIGHT WORMS
VIKRAM RAMAKRISHNAN
BOB RITCHIE
LOUIS ROSENBERG
MALENA SALAZAR MACÍÁ
CHUCK WENDIG

CALLIS PRAEDITIONEM RIDE THE SNAKE ONE OF US
A TWISTED RUN NOTHING NEW UNDER THE MOON
THE LIMINAL MEN HOME INSURANCE FALL IN THE BOX
THE BLUE MAN MEMORY SIMULATION FOR A GRANDMOTHER

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COVER ART

BLUE MURDER

by [Olly Jeavons \(aka artofolly\)](#)

In films, murders are always very clean. I show how difficult it is and what a messy thing it is to kill a man.”

—Alfred Hitchcock

To learn why I chose this Alfred Hitchcock quote to sum up my thoughts on this issue’s cover art, see Olly’s art feature, “The Hellfire Club,” later in this issue.

Is the suspense killing you? *Good.*

—Rob Carroll

Pictured left: *Blue Murder*





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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

PRISONERS

by [Rob Carroll](#)

I'm always amazed at how well our issue themes came together despite no theme being preplanned or pre-announced prior to open calls for submissions (our Halloween Special Issue exempted, of course). Every issue theme for 2021 happened spontaneously,¹ thanks in small part to some editorial finessing, and in large part to that magical ingredient present in all creative works: serendipity. Because these stars aligned, Issue 002 dealt masterfully with truth, Issue 003 toyed mischievously with recursion, and now Issue 005 shouts bitterly from the cold isolation of its own dark prison cell.

Upon deeper, more pragmatic reflection, it's not really that surprising that issue themes would self-organize so well by chance. All stories comment in one way or another on the same handful of basic human emotions. The human condition is vast and complex, but not much of it has been left unexplored, and even less of it remains uncoded. Plus, literary critique is really just the art of boxing in what should otherwise be left open to interpretation, so in that regard, the stories themselves are prisoners to my every editorial whim (I'm fighting the urge right now to cackle maniacally as I digress back into the topics of recursion and truth and centralized power—Issue 004's theme.)

So why imprisonment?

Why the emotion of feeling trapped?

1. I say "happened" (past tense) because our fiction lineups for all seven issues were finalized last year, following the close of our open call for stories last October.

Ever since humanity's Fall, be it from the theological Eden, or from what psychoanalysis would call "the loss of innocence," we have been wandering around the desert of the real in desperate search of a truth that we believe exists—either as a universal constant, or as something more ethereal that we can only make for ourselves—and for the most part, we've been coming up empty.

But this is our primary job as humans: to be meaning makers. We are the pattern seekers, the tragedy writers, the fools in the rain. And like it or not, this *is* who we are. No matter what we look like, or where we come from, at some point in our lives, we are all going to face a crisis of fortune (if we haven't already), and by extension, a crisis of meaning, because at some point in our lives, we are all going to suffer, and at some other point, we're all going to die.

Viktor Frankl (1905–1997), the famous Austrian neurologist, psychiatrist, philosopher, and Holocaust survivor, and the author of the landmark work of nonfiction, *Man's Search for Meaning*, drew from his experience as a prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp to later found what he called "logotherapy," which is a school of psychotherapy that describes the search for a life-meaning as the central human motivational force. Frankl believed that some people are better able to endure suffering precisely because they find meaning in the suffering, no matter how intense. Therefore, logotherapy (derived from the Greek word *logos*, which translates as "meaning") is a therapeutic approach that helps people find personal meaning in life, often times in an attempt to overcome trauma.

I don't want to overstate the importance of fiction when talking about matters of intense human suffering, so I won't. But relatively speaking, I do think story has an important role to play in our universal search for meaning. Aren't trials and catharsis two major pillars of storytelling? Don't these pillars, when acting in concert, support the dwelling place where our fears, but also our hopes and dreams reside? Doesn't this duality that seeks to imprison us also free us at the same time? And can we only experience freedom if, simultaneously, we are also inherently unfree?

Fiction does a great job of holding the real in one hand and setting it just far enough aside so as to more freely experience the alternate reality which it has created and now holds confidently in the other, palm open to the sky, the new world sparkling like a jewel in the sun, inhabited only by the dreams of what's possible. Escapism is not the fun little plaything of genre fiction, shunned by anyone creating "serious" art, nor should the word "escapism" be used to cheapen what is actually quite priceless: the ability to imagine a different world, for better *or* for worse.

I include “or for worse,” because this is not just about our dreams, after all. Humanity’s nightmares need attention, too—maybe even more than our hopes. According to Frankl, processing our collective terror is not only vital to our collective happiness, but also to our survival. If we constantly expect the world to be a place of joy and happiness, we will crumble at the first sign of adversity, and we will self-destruct at the first sign of defeat.

In this issue of *Dark Matter*, nine stories explore what it feels like to be a prisoner in some regard or another. “The Liminal Men,” by Thomas Ha, is the tale of a young man bound by familial duty in a world ruled by a powerful and nebulous tyranny. Malena Salazar Maciá’s, “Nothing New Under the Moon,” weeps softly for those subjugated by a colonial power not entirely unlike themselves. “Home Insurance,” by Gideon Marcus, is perhaps the most contemporary and relatable story of the bunch, as it follows a young woman struggling to survive in a future United States. She is free in body, but a prisoner to mounting debt and a rapidly failing economy and climate. Guy McDonnell’s “A Twisted Run” is a wild apocalypse story told by a young boy who quite literally runs to escape from the brutal abuses of a violent society built upon the ash of a paradise lost. “Ride the Snake,” by Claudine Griggs calls upon the spirit of Aldous Huxley (and namechecks him, too) by drawing up a scene in which a grade school class of good young citizens learn a whole new appreciation for their totalitarian masters following a bloody display of propaganda for which the children are left to applaud. Dawn Lloyd’s “The Blue Man,” is like a story from Ray Bradbury’s, *The Martian Chronicles*, with just as much social commentary, and twice the existential defeat. “Memory Simulation for a Grandmother,” by Vikram Ramakrishnan, explores how even in a police state, being a prisoner to one’s own memories can sometimes be a worse fate. “Callis Praedictionem,” by Renan Bernardo, shows us a man who is prisoner to his own academic hubris and his inability to let go. And finally, “Fall in the Box,” by Bob Ritchie, is the story of a young woman trapped by her fiancé’s misguided desire to turn back the clock following tragedy, despite such power being far beyond his control.

I sincerely hope you find meaning in the stories and features contained within this issue, even if that meaning is merely the satisfying feeling of enjoyment. That kind of meaning is often times the best.

Sincerely,

Rob Carroll
Editor-in-Chief





THE LIMINAL MEN

by [Thomas Ha](#)

The next time he comes looking for me, I'm wide awake.

Without drawing back the curtain, I can feel him standing outside the brownstone in the dark, waiting at the city sidewalk, just beyond the reach of the streetlight. The passersby can't see him the way that I can, because he's made sure to erase himself from their minds. But a few still know he's there by the sweet odor around him, like bananas left in the sun, or honey and clover, and they walk noticeably faster, while others who are none the wiser continue into the night unhurried.

Never look them in the eye. No matter what, Jamie used to tell me when we were boys. *If they know you can see them, it's over.* He'd make me practice in busy subway stations and at public events. I'd stand near the liminal men as they moved through the crowds, hunting. I got so good at it that they could hover over me with that gross, sweet breath, and I wouldn't flinch or move a muscle, just stare through them like they were smoke.

But, what I'm about to do now goes against pretty much everything Jamie taught me.

I summon the courage to look directly out the window, and I meet the liminal man's unnaturally large and unblinking eyes. He stares back at me from the curb, his pallid face floating under the wide brim of his black hat.

Like all of the liminal men, he has that sickly rictus that makes him look like a smiling ghost, and his wet teeth click sporadically, as if he's remembering how to talk or whispering to himself.

He can feel me, and he's trying to read me now.

When they do that, make your mind like dark water, Jamie used to say every time we came to one of the city checkpoints. He'd kneel and adjust my collar, making me repeat it back to him quietly. *Think of nothing, other than what's in front of you, and reflect that. Don't let them see what you're thinking under the surface.* Every time we'd get near the front of the line, where officers were waiting to check our licenses and question our reasons for crossing neighborhoods, I would keep my eyes away from the liminal man standing at the chain link fence. Any wrong thought, and he'd whisper to the officer to take us aside. I'd seen grown men thrash and scream and others go limp as the Ministry men dragged them away from the checkpoints. Sometimes it was because they were flagged, other times they said the wrong thing during questioning, but most often, it was because the liminal men saw something dangerous in them.

It takes everything in me to overcome my instincts as I break another one of Jamie's rules. I don't hide what I'm thinking at all as I look out the window.

I want the liminal man to know.

His eyes grow even larger, his breathing more excited.

The thing they enjoy most, more than catching Free Thinkers, is finding people like us, do you understand? Jamie whispered to me and held my wrist so tightly I thought he was going to break it. *You can never, and I mean never, use your cerebral abilities around them. Use your words when you talk to me, not thoughts. Words only.*

I tell myself that Jamie would understand why I'm not following his advice.

<I'm here.>

I push the thought toward the liminal man, like a boat moving across the water, and the moment he hears me speak in his mind, he shifts eagerly. I withdraw from the window, further into the house, and wait for his approach.

Everything is still until I hear the first creak upstairs. He's crawled up the side of the house, it seems, and has come in through one of the bedroom windows. I watch the ceiling as I reach over, turn on the record player, and drop the needle. The song that plays is one of my favorites, "Without Wonder in the World," by the Williams Brothers, a rock ballad from their early years, before they were banned by the Ministry for sedition.

After our parents were taken, and it was just Jamie and me on our own, we used to argue all the time about this song. He hated it when I went to

underground stores for blacklisted music, and he warned me that it was a breeding ground for Free Thinkers and other dissidents, which was not the deterrent he thought it was.

As I got older, and a little more rebellious, I wanted to express my anger with the Ministry, so I played this song constantly, soft enough that it wouldn't carry out of our home, but loud enough that Jamie would always have to hear it. I couldn't understand, then, how hard it must have been for him to take care of the both of us all by himself, even without me screwing around that way.

The Williams Brothers' crooning fills the house, and I hear the liminal man stop in his tracks. He already knows I'm cerebral, so I don't hide the fact that I'm using my abilities to connect to his mind and feel his reactions. The soft bass and snare drums join the guitars, and the liminal man turns his head. It's stirring something, but he doesn't understand what.

<I'm here.>

I ping him again.

The liminal man shakes off his hesitation and approaches the top of the stairway. With each step he takes, he passes the photographs that I hung on the wall. The picture of me as a baby in my mother's lap, and Jamie, with a bowl cut, sitting with our dad. The next photo of me and Jamie fishing on our uncle's boat. He lets me hold the bigger fish he caught, both of my hands above my head. Then the last photo, a portrait of Jamie when he graduated from high school. His hair is dark and shaggy, his grin confident and his eyes steely.

The liminal man stops at the last photo the longest.

<I'm here.>

I go to the kitchen and open the oven door, letting hot air billow so that the smell of the lasagna can fill the house. It's the only recipe our mother ever taught Jamie, so we used to have it all the time, frozen and ready to microwave when I came home from school, or set out on the table on Sunday nights, when he'd make us eat together. I still look back on those dinners fondly, even the tense ones in the later years, when we'd mostly argue about politics. The oregano, rosemary, and garlic all seep into the air, and I realize I've burnt the lasagna as I turn the oven off. But that doesn't much matter, so long as the liminal man can take in the aroma.

I feel the liminal man pausing at the entrance to the living room, like he's lost his balance. The smell is doing what it's supposed to, stimulating the parts of his brain that have been remade, bringing little images and emotions that surge through him like crackles of lightning.

He takes off the wide-brim hat and holds it against his chest. The ratty strands of his greasy, patchy hair trail down his scalp around the intertwining web of scars where his skull has been cracked open repeatedly.

Cautiously, I emerge from the kitchen, my hands raised.

"I'm here," I say, using my words.

The liminal man's eyes snap to me, and I realize that I haven't given him enough time. He lunges across the room, and his elongated fingers wrap around my throat just as I raise the modified magnesium lamp.

When I hit the charge, the powder ignites and smoke plumes from the long bar in my hand, setting off a brilliant, white flash that fills the space around us. The liminal man freezes in place, his brain arrested by the wavelengths released from the magnesium reaction.

This was one of the first techniques the Free Thinkers taught me. It was discovered accidentally by an amateur photographer in Denver, who, so the story goes, was trying to get around the Ministry's ban on cameras by tinkering with early flash photography equipment. What he found, instead of a way of lighting his subjects, was a method of confusing and paralyzing the liminal men. Something about what the Ministry did to their minds made them susceptible to this light and put them in a nearly catatonic state for several minutes.

The liminal man continues to stand in place, his mouth agape and eyes unfocused, while his body slightly trembles, and I lay out more powder on the bar in case I need to use it again.

"Listen to my voice," I say. "My voice. Listen to it."

I let my voice, the music, and the aroma from the kitchen continue to work on his mind as intended. Color seems to be seeping into his ashen skin at his jaw and around his neck. The normally impermeable shell around the liminal men that makes them impossible to injure, a combination of chemical treatments to their skin and a cerebral focus that hardens their bodies like iron, fades gradually. He is reverting, and even as the effects of the magnesium flash wear off, he looks at me sleepily and childlike.

He's blinking, and the wide curve of his fixed grin begins to drop as his facial muscles relax.

"Good," I say calmly, now that I have regained control. "Come with me."

I take the liminal man by the arm and lead him to the kitchen, seating him at a round table. He stares around with curiosity, as if he's taking in these surroundings for the first time, not knowing he has done this before.

He pauses and studies my face for a minute, almost like he understands who I am, and he tries to mouth something. During previous visits, I would have attempted to explain things, but I've learned it isn't effective, since he can't take in new information that way.

"Yes," I simply tell him comfortingly. "Sit here. Okay?"

My surgical tools are laid out on the counter, sterilized and ready for me to continue where we left off. The Williams Brothers are still singing from the record player while I don my face mask, gloves, and operating garb. When I'm ready, I drag a scalpel carefully along one of the main, fresh scars on the top of his head; like all of their wounds, it's already healed at an accelerated rate since the last time.

I tell the liminal man to stay perfectly still, and he feels nothing when I cut around his softened skin to find the main metal plate, easily removed and designed for ready and repeated access. I place it on the table on top of a towel.

<It's okay. > I comfort him with my cerebral abilities. <I'm here. >

It was what Jamie used to say to me, usually while I cried in bed and he brushed the hair from my eyes, whenever I had the nightmare where the liminal men were going to take me, just like they did our parents. And the only thing that calmed me was Jamie speaking directly into my mind.

<It's okay. I'm here. > He used to say.

The liminal man does not move while I set parts of his brain matter aside, but we are still connected in our thoughts, and I can feel him questioning.

I inspect the spider-like device on his frontal lobe more closely, following the wires that seem to deaden portions of his brain while stimulating others. My best guess is that the mechanism hinders foresight and areas integral to decision making, while enhancing other areas of the parietal lobe that give some of us our cerebral abilities.

Part of me expects to hear the telltale, rhythmic clicking from the device, the sign that it's beginning to reset. When it does that, I only have a few minutes before the Ministry's controls reassert themselves.

But, today, I've been delicate and quick, so I seem to have more time.

I'm still unable to remove the device without damaging the surrounding tissue, but each time we do this, I learn just a bit more.

Perhaps, just maybe, I'll be able to figure this out.

"What in God's name..."

A voice carries through the kitchen.

Without turning, I know Wilbur has come to check on me. He's the only other Free Thinker with a key to the safehouse, so it was just a matter of time until he'd be by.

I grip the scalpel tightly.

He steps around me and slowly removes his hat, then leans over my shoulder, too close, as if reminding me how much larger than me he is.

"You've really done it..." Wilbur mutters, staring at the liminal man's open skull. "He's reverted." His face twists into a big smile. "They *can* be killed, after all."

I say nothing.

Wilbur's smile disappears. "Good for you, cerebral boy." He sits down at the round table across from the liminal man, and his mouth twitches a little. "When you didn't check in, I thought you'd been taken or turned. Why didn't you tell us you'd gotten this far?"

I wipe my scalpel and place it next to my other tools on the counter. "I was going to, but I wanted to confirm a few things first."

Wilbur peers at the parts of the liminal man's brain that are in the open. "What's to confirm? Look at him. Bastard doesn't even know he's done for."

"Yes, well..." I clear my throat. "I'd appreciate it if you could step out of the area for a few minutes. I'm not quite finished."

"Oh?" Wilbur's dark eyes drift to me. "Am I getting in your way?"

"No, that's not exactly what I meant. It's just—"

"This experimental stuff is better for your type, right?"

"No."

"I'm better off out there, holding off the officers and liminal men."

"I didn't say that."

"Good." Wilbur leans forward. "Because I think I want to stay. Not every day you get to see what happens when a liminal man dies," he says. "Look at it. His skin, so soft, there's probably a dozen ways you could do it."

I don't reply.

"Go on," Wilbur presses. "Drag that little blade across his throat. Or better yet, stick it in his noggin and scramble his eggs."

I don't need my abilities to read the cloud around Wilbur, the one that tells me that I need to tread very carefully. He senses my hesitation and grows more agitated.

"What are you waiting for?" he asks. "Isn't this why you're here?"

I knew I would reach this moment, eventually, that I would have to explain myself, but I didn't think it would be Wilbur confronting me. When I started this experiment, I told the Free Thinkers there might be a way to make the liminal men like us, that we might be able to confront them instead of running every time they came hunting. We could, in theory, weaken them, but...

"It's become more complicated," I try to explain. "The way this liminal man has been reacting, he's been showing real thought. Maybe even emotion. It might not be just his body that's reverting. If that's the case, there might be a way to save them."

"Save?"

Wilbur's eyes flare.

"Maybe that's the wrong word. *Undo*," I rephrase. "We might undo what the Ministry did."

"Why?" he says, but it doesn't have the intonation of a question.

There is a turbulent flash in his thoughts, faces of Free Thinkers, people he knows. In his mind, I can see liminal men, crawling on ceilings and stalking him in the darkness. He remembers gunshots, metal bouncing off hardened skin, and their smiling faces as they continue to advance. He thinks of their large, long hands, snatching others while they scream. He's been fighting the Ministry for years more than I have, so there are a lot of images that surge for him all at once.

"Well." I struggle for an answer. "We might learn more about how the Ministry does this. Discover weaknesses to exploit. Maybe dive their minds for information. There's a lot of ways this could go. The point is we don't know yet. This is just the start, you know?"

For a minute, I believe I might have Wilbur convinced, because he grows quiet like he's actually thinking. But then I remember, he doesn't like thinking, and he draws a knife from his belt, six inches of serrated steel, and rises to his feet.

He walks over to my end of the table and gets in the liminal man's face.

"Wilbur," I mutter.

He takes the tip of his knife and puts it against the corner of the liminal man's eye. I can feel the liminal man still reaching out to me with his thoughts, wondering what's happening.

"Hold on, Wilbur."

He presses the knife slightly just under the eye and draws some blood. In Wilbur's mind, I hear a woman screaming somewhere.

"Wilbur!" I push his hand away.

He stops and looks at me. "You're right," he says. "You're absolutely right. I shouldn't be the one. It's your work after all." Wilbur walks over to the surgical tools. He picks up the scalpel and puts it back in my gloved hand. "Go on. Show me." He gestures at the liminal man below us.

"No."

"I said, go on." Wilbur repeats, holding my wrist a little too tightly.

"No."

“Last chance.”

I drop the scalpel on the floor.

“I knew it.” He laughs in almost a whisper. “That’s why you’re unreliable. Your kind. Just trying to help them all along.”

“No, Wilbur.”

“You’re just one bad doctor’s visit, yourself, from getting a big grin on your face. There’s no difference between you and them, right?”

“Wilbur...”

I see the face of that woman in his thoughts again, covered in blood. A smiling liminal man pries her mouth open with his fingers.

Wilbur backhands me with enough force that I fall to the ground, my ears ringing. I shuffle backward into the living room on my hands and feet, and he continues advancing. He’s thought of doing this for a while. I’ve sensed it, but he’s never allowed himself to act before this.

At first, he’s genuinely unsure if he just wants to frighten me or hurt me a little. But as he gets closer, I feel his mind gradually turning from that already turbulent place to something worse. Now, he’s imagining how anything that happens will look like an accident, like the experiment got out of hand, and the liminal man got out of my control.

The Free Thinkers would be disappointed, maybe, but they have my work. And they can always find other cerebrals to continue the cause.

Wilbur’s smile grows wider as he stands at the end of the living room.

I scramble to my feet, grabbing the magnesium lamp from the sideboard, and I run down one of the shadowy hallways. I can hear Wilbur’s footsteps slowly thudding on the wooden floors, clearly in no rush to catch up with me.

His low voice carries through the house, and I realize he’s singing along to the Williams Brothers record, using an old trick that keeps cerebrals like me from reading his thoughts by focusing on the lyrics.

The bedroom in the corner of the house has a window that leads to a fire escape, so I sprint to it and lock the door behind me. The cold night air seeps in when I slide open the window frame, but instead of crawling out onto the metal ladder, I withdraw to the closet on the other side of the room, sliding its door shut, holding my breath in the dark.

This was how I escaped the Ministry, the day they came to our house for Jamie, too. Their footfalls echoing through the house, just like Wilbur’s now. I sat in the closet, behind a small dresser, while they searched briefly, finding open windows and assuming that anyone else, if they even had been there, had fled.

<It’s okay.> Jamie thought, as they took him away.

<Wait for me. I’ll be here.>

And then he was gone.

And I was alone.

The sound of Wilbur breaking the bedroom door, kicking it loose from the rusted strike, startles me. He's still singing softly, blocking me from his thoughts, and he walks casually toward the window and pauses. The Williams Brothers song in the living room comes to an end, finally, and the music fades to the clicks and pops and hisses of the record finishing.

"I don't have to read minds to know you're a hider, not a runner," Wilbur says. "Get on out here."

I stay still.

"You're really going to make me, aren't you?"

Just as he yanks the closet door open, I set off the flash of the magnesium lamp in his face. Wilbur grunts and loses balance, and I try to get by him to the door, but he grabs me by the shoulder and throws me into a wall.

"Come on!" Wilbur snarls. "You know that shit won't work on me. I'm not a monster, am I? Now stop it. I'm not going to hurt you. Just stand up straight."

He waits for me to lower my arms, and I keep my eyes on his knife, now pressed against my belly.

"Get a hold of yourself. Like a real man. There you go," he says.

The house is dead quiet, and I can hear every thought of his with clarity now.

I look him in the eye, and we both know that I understand what's coming.

"Good boy," he says. "See? Nothing to be afraid of."

Behind his head, long, pale fingers extend out on either side. Wilbur can't see them the way that I can, but he must smell that scent, the sweetness in the air around us, because a sudden look dawns across his face, realizing it's too late.

The liminal man's hands close like a vise. The knife in Wilbur's hand clatters to the floor as he's lifted up and his legs dangle. He flails and swings his arms around while the fingers tighten around his throat. I should feel more pity for him, but I know exactly what he was about to do to me, and I can't bring myself to help.

Wilbur's eyes bulge and roll upward, and his face changes color, until I hear what I think is the wet sound of his windpipe slowly being forced shut.

Eventually, quietly, his entire body slackens.

When it's done, the liminal man puts Wilbur down on the ground like he's laying out a sheet of laundry. Then his large eyes turn to me, and he steps forward, reaching toward me next.

I stay completely still.

The liminal man reaches to my forehead and brushes my hair from my eyes. He blinks and searches my face.

<*Do you know me?*> I touch his hand.

His mind reaches back with that questioning feeling, unsure of what I'm telling him.

<*It's me.*> I say.

He whispers, like he wants to tell me something, but he's frustrated that he can't convey it. He tries again, and it won't come, slipping away before he can get a hold of it.

<*It's okay.*> I tell him. <*I'm here.*>

I can hear the device in his still-open skull clicking, beginning to reset itself. I want to tell him who I am, who we are, because he might finally understand me in this state. But I know we don't have the time.

Instead, I lead him from the room, away from Wilbur's body and his lifeless, glassy eyes, back to the kitchen, to the chair, where I set the metal plate back in its place and sew his incisions shut, like I've done many times before. When I'm done, I pick up his wide-brim hat from the table and put it back on him.

He stands in front of me, blinking, and I adjust his collar.

I do want to win this—for all of this to be over and for the Ministry to fall, more than anything, I do. And weakening the liminal men could very well be the first step. But no matter what the Free Thinkers say, or whomever they send next, I have to make them understand. If he's still in there, somewhere, if there's a chance that any of them can be saved, then I have to keep going, keep trying to bring them back, because it will never be a real victory if we leave our loved ones behind.

I walk with him to the front door, and I watch as he goes down the steps and stops at the sidewalk. He looks back at the house again, almost like he's focusing as hard as he can. The place will linger, just enough, in the back of his mind, so that he'll know to return, though he won't know why he's there or what he's looking for when he does.

He still will, probably, not know me for a long while yet.

But we'll keep trying, the both of us.

It's all we can do now, try.

Eventually, his skin loses its color, fading again to that ashen gray. His blinking slows, and his stare becomes increasingly vacant. Just as I draw the curtains shut, I watch his lips curl and rise, the strained grin growing on his face as the Ministry takes hold of him.

He's lost to me, smiling at nothing, in the dark.

But I'm still there, behind the curtain.

And I give him a small and hesitant smile back.

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NOTHING NEW UNDER THE MOON

by [Malena Salazar Maciá](#)

Translated by Toshiya Kamei

The strangers came down from the heavens in silver-gray ships with no roaring propellers, spewing dark liquid. I snuck a peek at them from behind my parents. They looked like us—four limbs, mouth, nose, eyes shielded behind heavy lids. They were our mirror images, as if looked through stained glass. With smiles on their faces, they salivated over our vast, fertile land.

“This land is ours now,” the strangers told us through their AI interpreters. “It’ll do us good to settle here.”

In return, they gave us a sliver of the knowledge stored in their memory banks—handed down from their ancestors, as well as acquired while traversing through the immense void. They wanted a place to live, like the rest of us. We acquiesced. They thrived in their new world, which had been ours since forever.

A few moon cycles later, the strangers paid us a visit. The land they made theirs responded well to their hands. But as they grew in number, resources became scarce. They should have gone easy on reproduction. They needed more space to expand their paradise.

“Don’t look for another place for us,” they told us, grinning from ear to ear. “We’ve found forests, mountains, steppes, rivers, and seas. We’ve scared away intruders. We’ve got everything we need. Now all that will be ours, too.”

We lowered our heads and gave in. After all, we felt as if we were looking at our reflections.

Some of us became alarmed. Rumors spread that the strangers didn't come in peace. They were conquerors. Grabbed everything they could get their hands on and sucked the earth dry. Then they moved on to the next world, trampled everything in sight, ripped it apart, and molded it to their liking. They wanted all or nothing.

We split into different factions. Some of us went to their settlements and came back with wonderful stories. Others stayed there, mingled with the strangers, and lived among them. The strangers, who took root on our planet, also came to us. They imposed their laws on us, claiming that theirs were better than ours. They showed us their reproductive methods, holograms, languages, and gods. They convinced us that theirs were better than ours, stuffing their culture down our throats. Our ways of living were inferior, risible, and out-of-date.

The strangers gave us lessons. They called us useless and lazy. They wanted us to discard our beliefs that had given us comfort for many moon cycles. They urged us to take risks and embrace change. As far as they were concerned, they were here to civilize, educate, and train ignorant barbarians.

Maybe we should have listened to the dissident voices among us. Maybe we shouldn't have offered the strangers shelter when their silver-gray ships landed. We should have realized that the glass through which we saw them was stained. Their movements changed. Their words, their breathing, and their way of listening to us altered. They pulled back the lids that shielded their eyes, revealing their scorn, disgust, and hatred, along with the fear of the other, the foreign, the unknown.

Our social status changed. In the eyes of the strangers, we became outcasts, inferiors, and savages. Threats, plagues, and invaders. We committed blasphemy when we kissed the earth and didn't look up at them, heavenward, according to their laws. They erected statues of themselves and put invisible shackles on our wrists and ankles. They burned down our idols and spat on our customs. They hated mixing. They needed us, but at the same time, they didn't.

"What are you complaining about?" the strangers asked. "What makes you think you're our equals?" They razed our homes and built theirs upon them. "Now we own this land. It's ours. You were born to work. To serve us. We've got to build incinerators. We've got to put you in your place."

We were prey. The strangers pursued us, searched for hybrids, cooked up conspiracies, and hunted their own species when some defended

our cause. They silenced those who protested by slapping them with trumped-up charges.

Under the crescent moon, my people snuck up to where the strangers kept their silver-gray ships. We approached them and told them we needed to leave behind our ancestral land. We needed to escape and start anew. Those who came to our defense left with us.

As our allies piloted the ships, we learned about the cosmos, its mysteries, and its dangers. We saw worlds on the verge of collapse, devoured by themselves. They warned us of the past and prepared us for the future. They plotted safe routes to evade spies, hunters, and space pirates. Hundreds died from inclement weather, accidents, and old age. New generations were spawned. Beautiful blends came forth and preserved both cultures. We learned to fight and survive until we found a new world to settle.

We landed in the middle of a dense jungle that brought us tears of nostalgia for what we had lost. No one showed up to receive us. Our ships failed to detect any intelligent life. But the planet came with an adequate atmosphere, a stable biome, and stars that would bring us times of abundance and scarcity at reasonable intervals. The virgin land seemed so similar to the one we left behind that we kissed the ground and called it home.

The creatures crawled out of the thicket and came out into a patch of moonlight. They inched closer and stared at us with a mixture of curiosity and fear in their eyes. Far from our mirror images, they hardly resembled us, not even through tainted glass. Always moving on all fours, they had wolf-like snouts and furry, pointed ears. They communicated through grunts, groans, howls, and roars. Their blunt claws doubled as clubs and sharp stones. They seemed primitive.

“This land is ours now. It’ll do us good to settle here,” our youth explained through our AI interpreters.

Those of us who had come on board turned into wrinkled beings as death’s cold hand tugged at our souls. The invisible shackles weighed heavily on us. We suffered the stings of hatred, contempt, and disgust. Our homes crumbled. Our knees grazed the hard earth as we begged for mercy. History hadn’t been handed down to our youth, or they thought it wasn’t necessary to learn from it. Many gazed up skyward, not down earthward.

We never escaped the shadows of the silver-gray ships that unleashed the invaders on our old home.





HOME INSURANCE

by [Gideon Marcus](#)

Carlsbad, California, with its palm trees, white sand, and Victorian/Wilhelmsian architecture, was too nice a place to live. After the housing boom in the early 21st century, only those who were very rich or who had managed to secure their homes prior to the sudden inflation of prices could afford to live there. For these precious few, the seaside community remained a bubble of security while the world went to hell around it.

Every year, factories, “clean” coal plants, oil-powered cars, and billions of cattle continued to belch millennia’s worth of biological byproducts in gaseous form into the atmosphere. The air remained roughly the same color to the naked eye, but became increasingly opaque to infrared, and the Earth stirred uneasily, warming under its invisible blanket.

They didn’t notice this in Carlsbad, blessed as it was with a perfect Mediterranean climate. While temperatures soared around the world, turning places like Yanbu, Saudi Arabia and Phoenix, Arizona into uninhabitable furnaces, the residents of Carlsbad smiled at how mild the winters had gotten. Category 6 hurricanes pummeled the Gulf Coast. Typhoons hit Okinawa with increasing frequency and fervor. The weather of the United Kingdom (of late, comprising just England, Wight, and Jersey) became even worse. In Carlsbad, its citizens delighted at the occasional claps of winter thunder that greeted their ears.

Even the flooding from the melting of the polar ice caps went hardly noticed in the southern Californian town. Sure, the disappearances of Nauru, Tuvalu, the Maldives, and Bangladesh made for interesting news

and poignant memes, but the sharply sloped Pacific coast meant that rising seas devoured very few homes in Carlsbad, and those that lived on the eastern side of sea-straddling Highway 101 smugly exulted in now owning beachfront property.

If there was a snake in the Garden, it was unemployment. To be sure, doomsayers had predicted mass joblessness since the first automatic sock-maker was commissioned in the 18th century, but this time, at last, it was real. Cars were self-driving. Restaurants were roboticized. Assembly lines were machine-run (and assembled).

For most Carlsbadians, the lack of employment was no inconvenience; old money and high property values kept them afloat. And in turn, they kept their fellow, poorer citizens afloat. Not through charity, of course, but because there was always more prestige in human servants, nannies, shoppers, accountants, attorneys, etc.

Then came the Big One of 2107.

Though the famous San Andreas fault runs right through the middle of California, geologists had always thought San Diego County to be a stable island of crust, non-aligned in the never-ending cold war between the Pacific and Cuzco continental plates. They were wrong.

The massive quake battered Carlsbad and its neighboring, formerly idyllic, communities of Encinitas and Oceanside, disintegrating whole subdivisions of squarish beige McMansions. Hills sank into the sea, which now extended fingers as far inland as the local Palomar Airport. Annual floods ravaged the lowered lands. Weather patterns shifted: warm summers became intolerably muggy. Torrential winter rains dug deep gullies into the hillsides. Fierce Santa Ana winds whipped autumn fires into infernos that licked at the edges of the city every few years despite valiant efforts to stop them.

The bubble was burst. Carlsbad was part of the rest of the world now.



Tala looked over her insurance statement once more, trying to make the numbers add up to be enough, and knowing she was still short.

Flood insurance: \$2150.17

Fire insurance: \$1912.75

Earthquake insurance: \$1544.34

Allergy insurance: \$1459.10

Unemployment insurance: \$740

Insurance insurance: \$794.69

It was almost enough for her and her mother to live on, but not quite. Not in Carlsbad, even with the now-reduced property values.

There was one thin reed of hope. She thumbed through her handie to see if any of the job opportunities had panned out. A frown darkened the lines in her face. Rejected for the Globe-mart Assistant Manager job (not enough experience). Rejected for the retail position at the one remaining upscale shopping center (too old). Rejected for the county administration position (lack of connections). No nanny positions. No maid positions. No cook positions. The affluent of Carlsbad had fled in droves, their Eden corrupted, leaving behind those whose only asset was their home, a home of severely depreciated value.

Tala set down her handie and once again considered striking out as an entrepreneur. Once, she'd planned to be an Essential Ointments marketer. There was that guy she'd met at the job center who offered to give her a bunch of stock cheap. All Tala needed to do was get three people who wanted to sell for *her*, and she'd be set. But when she'd finally messaged her contact to let him know she was interested, Tala had gotten a response from his parole officer saying he was no longer allowed to participate in such practices. Something about pyramids and MLMs, whatever those were.

Then there was the Swap, trading little artistic creations and collectibles for cash or goods that could be delivered by drone across the world. She wasn't very good with her hands, though, and she didn't even know where to begin finding antiques to barter. How about writing? No, that certainly didn't pay enough to live on.

She looked at the statement again and sighed. The only good thing about being unemployed was that insurance money went *into* her bank account rather than being deducted *out*. Once more she totaled up the numbers on the handie's sheet-sized projection. Not enough for here, but maybe...God, she hated to consider it...maybe it was just time to leave Carlsbad. There were plenty of places in the country where her insurance payouts would cover basic expenses. And whatever she lost in earthquake coverage by moving to, say, Oklahoma, would be more than made up for in federal tornado insurance. One place was as good as any other, right?

As if in answer, a warm breeze blew through the screen in the front door, tinkling the little wind chimes hanging from the frame. Tala turned, the smooth hardwood floor creaking softly under her bare feet. She surveyed her living room, starkly shadowed by the setting sun, and appreciated it as if it were new. The big sofa, the vintage IKEA dining table and chair set, the checker-box tapestry quilted by her mother's grandmother. Through the bay window, the ocean was a shimmering

plain between the (remaining) apartment towers to the west. Birdsong and cicada chirp were the melody above the omnipresent bass rumble of traffic along the new Interstate Five.

She shook her head. How could she consider leaving Carlsbad? Maybe it wasn't quite the paradise Tala had known as a little girl, but it was still the only home she'd ever known. Besides, her mother would absolutely refuse to leave, especially with papa's ashes buried in the backyard. There was nothing for it. She was just going to have to find a way to make it work.



Tala converted her seat into a couch, giving complete trust to her driverless electric car. The vehicle sped in regimented formation with the other autos on the freeway. The commute to the Regional Employment Center in Orange County took about an hour. A century earlier, the trip length had varied wildly: a single inattentive or road-raging driver could snarl up traffic for hours. Such things were long forgotten now.

Tala considered taking a nap, but she was too nervous about today's interview. It was make-it or break-it time: either she qualified for some line of needed work, or she lost her unemployed status and the insurance that went with it. Sure, UI contributed the least of her income these days, but every cent mattered. Moreover, if her record showed a lack of qualification, that further reduced her chances of ever finding work in California. She stared wistfully at the dazzling ocean, deep deep blue, hemmed in between bright cerulean and vibrant green. Along the coast, slender windmills chopped the air, and beyond, Tala could see the squat silver of the tidal energy generators. It was all achingly beautiful.

"Handie, put on GNN," she called out.

A cacophony of voices filled the car's interior before the handie dulled them to a more tolerable level. It was a talking-heads roundtable, rather unusual for the Global News Network, which had long ago filled most of their program slots with live gossip paparazzi shows. Actual, informative news had died in darkness, circa 2063.

The man on the right had his arms folded, suit crumpled in dignified disdain. "What *about* Basic Income?" he said, the sneer implied if not sounded.

"It's clearly an idea whose time came a long time ago." The woman on the left had her hair in tight curls, and she wore bright blue. "We are never going to get below 15 percent unemployment, and we must address the rampant poverty in this nation." Her deep voice spoke with compelling cadence.

The host, of indeterminate age and gender, dressed in gray, swiveled their head again. “What do you say to that, Bob?”

He waved his gleamingly manicured hands. “What the Congresswoman is talking about is Socialism. I don’t think there’s anyone in this great nation of ours that wants to go down the same road as hellholes like Venezuela, Nazi Germany, or Denmark.”

His opponent leaned forward. “The current system is hopelessly broken and corrupt,” she said. “The American people never get enough help, and at that, only when their situation is beyond intolerable. And if handing over half the budget to private insurance companies isn’t socialist redistribution, what is?”

“Hah,” the man barked. “What we have in America is market-based liberty. No one’s starving, right?” He seemed to wink directly at Tala, and her skin felt crawly. “Everyone works to the best of their ability, and insurance makes sure their needs are taken care of. It’s the opposite of socialism.”

Tala couldn’t take any more. “*Handie, turn it off!*” she shouted. The three figures faded from view leaving just the slate of the asphalt and the dark shimmer of photovoltaics gliding past the vehicle; but she did not see these, for her eyes were shut tight. When she opened them, her vision was blurred with tears. She blinked them away, then noted that her palms hurt. They’d been clenched, too, and there were four pink impressions in the flesh.

Tala just had to qualify for a career. She didn’t know what she’d do otherwise.



The Orange County REC was a sprawling complex. It had long outgrown the big brown central building, and “temporary” trailers were sited in concentric masses. Tala’s car stopped on the roof of the REC’s parking structure, and its door slid open, dry air gusting in to hit her like a sheet of sandpaper. She sneezed and hastened to the elevator.

It wasn’t much better at ground level. The strong Santa Anas blew dust along the way and slapped at the cuffs of her slacks. Tala squinted at her handie once more, looking for her destination. Office 25B, Building 17. A warm voice in her ear directed her through the labyrinth of portable buildings, their stained foundations and faded paint betraying decades of use. Off in the distance, she saw the four mountains of Disneyland. She paused for a moment, wistful in childhood memories. Then she shook her head. If she couldn’t afford to live in Carlsbad, she certainly couldn’t afford the luxury apartments of the Magic Kingdom. Anyway, her cousins hadn’t lived there for a long time.

Building 17 was one of the REC's permanent structures, a squat building whose wide windows stared blankly at Tala. She brushed past the long line of people without appointments and through the sliding doors into the lobby. The over-cooled air pummeled her almost as badly as the Santa Anas had outside, and with no more moisture in it. Tala rubbed away the goose pimples.

There were several flat displays in prominent locations, each with something different on them—some kind of sports game, a kids' show, a news channel—despite the fact that everyone had carried their own visual entertainment in their pockets for decades now. The news screen caught Tala's eye, lurid shots of a building afire. The chyron scrolled: DOMESTIC TERRORISM IN CHICAGO, THIRD U.S. INCIDENT THIS WEEK. She squinted, trying to make out the target, and let out a little "ah" when she spotted the letters on the side spelling out "Nestle Water Facility." It seemed self-defeating to blow up a public utility, but more and more were being targeted every day. Nobody seemed to be doing much about it, either.

Tala shook her head and walked up to the reception desk.

"Welcome to the Regional Employment Center. Can I help you?" the man behind the counter asked brightly. He was young and clean-cut, his beard a tasteful shade of purple. Beside him, two other staffers in red social service uniforms smiled engagingly. Tala eyed them with envy. The government was one of the few places that still employed human beings in service positions.

"I've got an appointment for 10:15," she answered. "Tala Santos?"

The receptionist's eyes unfocused slightly, and then he smiled brightly. "Of course. Just down that way." He extended a pudgy, crimson-sleeved arm to his left.

"Office" 25B turned out to be a double-size cubicle, its walls only three feet high, in the back of the big common space. A gold placard at its doorless entrance read "Bradley Silac." Tala walked in, and the old, rather shapeless woman behind the black plastic desk bade her with a wave to sit down.

"You're Julie Navarro?" Silac asked, her brown eyes not focused on Tala. "No, my 10:15. Tala Santos." Her gaze returned to Tala. "Professional assessment, right?"

Tala licked dry lips. "That's right."

Silac leaned back in her chair, which creaked under the weight. Seeming to look at nothing in particular, she continued. "Your file says you got your degree thirty years ago. English." Silac grunted the word as if it tasted bad. "Right?"

"Yes, but I just completed a virtual course and got a credential," Tala said quickly. She held up her handie, the certificate glowing above the device. Silac leaned in for a view, peering myopically.

"Communications," the administrator read.

"That's right, ma'am, and Social Maneuvering." Tala looked at Silac hopefully. Social Maneuvering was supposed to be the next big thing. After all, computers made lousy salespeople and lobbyists.

"I see." The words had the snap of a door closing. Silac continued to review her certificate. "Between you and me, the time to get that credential was about ten years ago. The market's glutted with communicators. Looks like most of your other professions are outmoded, too." Looking up to see Tala's crestfallen expression, the older woman's stern features softened slightly. She cleared her throat. "Well, let's see." A pause as the administrator's eyes unfocused. Tala caught a glint of what she was looking at—documents flashed directly to her pupils. "Says here you used to work as a paralegal."

"Yes, I did!" Tala said.

"Not much call for that these days."

"No...no, not lately."

"Personally," the administrator said conspiratorially, "I think that's a mistake. Computers miss things." She paused. "Well, this may be your lucky day."

Tala blinked. "What is it?"

"Foreign companies are often more old-fashioned and like to staff humans in their legal administration. There are extranationals establishing their presence all along California coast: San Diego; San Luis Obispo; Bay Area, too, though that's a bit of a commute."

Who cared? Six hours round-trip on the fast-train every day, but it would be worth it, Tala thought. Besides, she could sleep on the way. Hope spread warm in her chest.

"I don't see any record that you speak another language, though—"

"Oh, but I do!" Tala blurted. "I'm trilingual!"

Silac let slip the ghost of a smile. "Interesting. See? Computers don't know everything. How's your Mandarin?"

Tala's mouth opened soundlessly.

"No? How about Arabic?"

Tala shook her head.

"Swahili?"

"N-no."

"Hmm. I shouldn't play guessing games. What languages do you speak?"

"I speak perfect Tagalog and Spanish, ma'am," Tala said with all the confidence she could muster.

The ensuing pause stretched a fraction too long. In that second, Tala was utterly aware of every noise in the room: the drone of the air conditioning, a conversation in the next cubicle over, tinny music from someone's handie.

"Oh," Silac said.

The flash of hope became acid in Tala's stomach.

"Lots of Spanish speakers looking for work, I'm afraid," the administrator said at last.

Tala nodded.

"And the Filipinos are all speaking Mandarin these days."

"Yes, ma'am," Tala mumbled.

Silac leaned back heavily in her chair, the light of reflected documents flickering out in her eyes. "I'm afraid there's nothing in your background to qualify you this round. You'll have an opportunity to attempt requalification in 180 days."

"But ma'am, if I couldn't qualify now, how will I qualify then?"

The administrator looked at Tala blandly. "Take another course." It sounded like a question.

"How can I survive until then without unemployment?"

Silac shrugged. "I don't make the rules, Ms. Santos."

Tala rose from her chair. "Couldn't you extend the deadline? Even just a couple months. I'm sure I can find something."

"I'm sorry." Silac's tone was final, if not insincere. She looked up from Tala. "Ah, that's my 10:30. Good luck, Ms. Santos."



The ride back went by in a blur. Turmoil wracked her such that Tala was thoroughly unaware of her surroundings, of the cars moving in automated lock step beside her, of the offices and shopping centers giving way to sprawling tracts of homes. Her thoughts bounced between self-loathing and despair. What was the point of carrying on if she was of no use to anyone? Could she continue in any meaningful way if she had to uproot herself from Carlsbad? How could Tala face her mother with the news that her daughter was useless and that they were going to have to leave their home?

Only when the last edifices gave way to the verdant hills of Camp Pendleton, the Marine Corps preserve that still acted as a bulwark against Los Angeles's southward creep, did she come to awareness. It was beautiful here, the vivid

green slopes descending into grassy coastal plain. And on the other side of the freeway, silvery breakers lapped against the shore. A military jet-copter flew overhead, rattling the car as it roared off to join a platoon of soldiers on maneuvers in the distance.

At least they're working, Tala thought bitterly. The military would be a welcome career, steady work and reasonable pay. And it wasn't like soldiers were deployed abroad anymore, though civil unrest could be just as dangerous as foreign conflict. But Tala had long since missed that opportunity. She was too old and, if she were honest with herself, not in any kind of shape for it.

The car snaked around a bend and the twin domes of San Onofre came into sight, dingy but still impressive on the beach. Power lines had long since been disconnected from the defunct nuclear power plant, but the buildings remained, their radioactive cores yet stored within the seagull-splattered hemispheres. They would be for hundreds of years, or until some state finally authorized a central storage site for spent nuclear fuel. Tala scoffed ruefully. The power plant was like her, full of potential but useless, well past its prime...and just as unable to relocate.

The plant loomed to the right, and then was gone behind her. Tala was thirty minutes from home.



Tala's mother was waiting when she got home, rocking gently in the comfy chair in front of the window, still dressed in bedclothes. The old woman never watched a screen, preferring to read or do Sudoku with a full view of the town she loved.

"How did it go?" Tala's mother asked.

Tala took off her suit jacket and put it carefully on one of the dining chairs before answering.

"Could've been better."

"I'm sorry, sweetie. Come here." She held out her arms without getting up, an offer of a hug. Tala hesitated, feeling guilty to take even that much, feeling every inch the failure. But her need for comfort was stronger, and she went to her mother's embrace. The old woman still had strength in her plump arms, and she squeezed Tala tightly.

"Don't worry. God provides. After all, he gave us this paradise to live in."

Tala stifled a sniffle, blinking back tears. For her mother, Carlsbad was still paradise, even now. She disengaged, saying, "I'll make us some tea, mama."

“That sounds lovely.”

Paradise. Paradise. The word echoed dully in Tala’s mind as she went to the small but functional kitchen. *Paradise.* She opened the cupboard to get the tea pods. The word became *paradigm* as she put the pods in the maker and filled it with water. *Paradigm.* A typical example or model, Tala remembered from a class long ago. The pattern of her useless life. *Paradigm,* her brain repeated mockingly. The maker began to bubble, the water in the pot turning brown. *Paradox.* Wanting to work. Unable to work. *Paradox.* Wanting to live. Unable to live. The pod had fully dissolved, and the fresh smell of tea was pleasantly flowery. Tala reached for the pot. *Pairadome.*

Her lip quirked. That wasn’t a word. *Pairadome.* Her mind conjured an image of the two forlorn half bubbles on the beach, red beacons flashing at their tops. A pair of domes. She grabbed a mug and poured the tea.

Pairadomes. The nonsense thought stayed with Tala as she walked back into the living room and handed the tea to her mother. A gentle ping and a buzz issued from Tala’s pocket, a message on the handie. In trepidation, she pulled out the handie and saw it was just the REC confirming in writing what Silac had said in person. *Pairadomes. Useless like me.* Out of habit, Tala called up the insurance income statement again, knowing there was no way to make the numbers add up, especially not now without unemployment insurance.

Pairadomes.

And then it hit her. *Of course.* Her eyes widened.

“Are you okay?” Tala’s mother asked.



It proved much easier to acquire a truckload of explosives and a truck to carry them than Tala had thought possible—much easier than getting a job, in fact. The proximity of several military bases provided the *materiële*; discontent with the state of society and economics created the black market. If purchasing the contraband required the last of her savings and the loss of some of the family’s most prized possessions, well, that’s what it took.

Three weeks after the last UI payment arrived, Tala found herself cruising down the Five in a repainted mail delivery vehicle, part of the ancient fleet retired decades before when drones had fully taken over transport of packages. Her calves ached from the pressure required to maintain a constant speed in the manually operated truck. A modern electric car would have been so much easier to manage, but then an electric car wouldn’t be up to the task she had planned.

Sweat dripped into Tala's eyes, blurring the headlights of the automated traffic into prismatic circles until she wiped it away with a jerky, nervous motion. Any minute, she was certain, the sound of sirens would assail her ears, and a flashing light would signal that the police had caught onto her scheme. By the time she had passed Las Pulgas, Tala was a wreck, ready to surrender for a life in prison. At least then she wouldn't have to worry about paying for her meals and housing.

It seemed almost a miracle, then, when she arrived at the San Onofre exit without incident. Tala wrestled the big vehicle down the two-lane access street. She needed to find the right spot, one with sufficient height and run space. There, up ahead in the gloom, was the little road she'd seen on the map. The tires crunched as asphalt gave way to dirt and rubble, but the old mail truck was up to the task, shifting itself obligingly to lower gear.

Five minutes later, Tala stood beside the truck, staring down at the glowing lights of the San Onofre station. It still bewildered her that there were so few guards—just the two tiny figures making the rounds behind the fence a quarter-mile down the hill. There could be no shortage of people who would take the job. Then she remembered the news screen at the employment center. Of course there weren't enough guards. No one was willing to pay them—anywhere. Insurance was cheaper than staff.

It was all for the best. Tala was desperate, but she had no desire to hurt anyone. Sweat pimpled cold on her skin. If the place *had* been guarded, she realized, she'd already have been arrested. She sighed and shook her head. She really hadn't thought things out very well.

Oh well. I'm here now.

Tala took a deep breath, looked up at the sky, and crossed herself. Setting the truck in neutral, Tala placed the brick on the accelerator pedal and locked the steering wheel. The diesel engine roared with delight. Then, in one smooth motion, she shifted the vehicle into Drive and jumped away. She tripped on loose dirt, landing ungracefully on her behind, and sat staring dazedly after the runaway. It raced gleefully toward the station, its aim perfect. *Good God, what have I done?*

Adrenaline flooded into her system, shocking her back to her senses. She had to get out *now*. Tala raced up the hill, north and away from the station. Chaparral clutched and tore at her pant legs. There was a loud crash, followed by what Tala thought might be a cry of surprise. Then the boom of explosion as the truck's cargo detonated, and the hillside shimmered with illumination. She resisted the urge to turn, like Orpheus, and see the extent of her success. Instead, panting and heedless of the cramps stitching her side, Tala ran like the demons themselves were after her.



A sultry breeze blew through the screen door, tinkling the little wind chimes. June was a hot and humid month; ventilation did little to help the situation.

“Tala, why don’t you turn on the air conditioner?” her mother called from her favorite chair.

There was a moment of resistance, old habits conditioning Tala against wasting electricity. Then she remembered her situation and smiled. They had money to spend these days. Sure, an increased leukemia risk, too, but that was something for the future to worry about.

Closing the front door, she walked over to her mother and patted her shoulder. Tala pulled out her handie and set the thermostat lower. There was a gentle hum, a whirl, and cool air caressed them. She took a deep breath, feeling more relaxed than she had in...well, she could not remember. Idly, she thumbed her handie to bring up the latest insurance statement again, and her smile broadened.

Flood insurance: \$2150.17.

Fire insurance: \$2045.98.

Earthquake insurance: \$1544.34.

Allergy insurance: \$1459.10.

Insurance insurance: \$600.41.

Radiation insurance: \$3,361.61.



DEATH IN THE MOUTH

DEATH IN THE MOUTH is an illustrated horror anthology showcasing BIPOC and other ethnically marginalized writers and artists from around the world.

It will feature twenty prose stories spanning from the distant past to the far future, real and fictive worlds, all while exploring new and unique manifestations of horror. Each story will also be accompanied by an original black and white illustration by a unique artist.

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ART FEATURE

THE HELLFIRE CLUB

Art by [Olly Jeavons \(aka artofolly\)](#)

Feature by Rob Carroll

Legendary film director, Alfred Hitchcock, famously said of suspense, “The more left to the imagination, the more the excitement.”

For some reason, and I’m not sure why, the art of Olly Jeavons (known by his pen name, artofolly) reminds me of a Hitchcock film—like *North by Northwest*, but set in Hell. Maybe it’s because certain works of his draw strongly from the globetrotting, spy-thriller pop art of the 1950s and ’60s, specifically his Hotheads series (“Blue Murder,” the cover art for this issue of *Dark Matter*, is part of Olly’s Hotheads world). Or maybe it’s because like Hitchcock, Olly focuses not just on what the image *is*, but what it conveys. Olly’s work tells a story.

In my mind, there is something so perfect about art like this gracing the cover and interior of a genre fiction magazine in the year 2021. Nearly seventy years after the end of science fiction’s Golden Age, when thrilling action scenes jumped off many of the covers of that era’s pulps, Olly proves that a similar modernized style remains just as powerful as its forebears without owing any of that power to the simple explanation of nostalgia.

In my opinion, Olly’s art succeeds because it does with a single static image what some film directors fail to do with an entire motion picture: capture the viewer’s imagination.

Pictured left: *It’s a Dirty...WAR*

Whenever I look at one of Olly's illustrations, my imagination immediately dives headfirst into whatever fictional world he's created. My mind starts to write narratives, explore backstories, develop motivations, and demand answers. *Why are these skeleton men carrying another skeleton man's corpse? Is he friend or foe? And why are the possible perpetrators being so secretive about it? Can skeletons be murdered? I assume he's been murdered. Why else would the flame atop his skull head be*



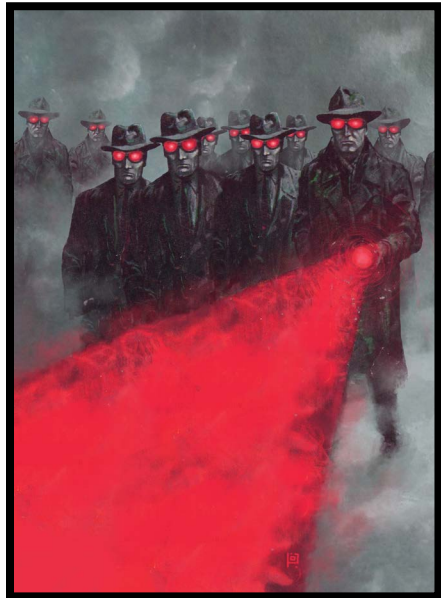
Pictured above: *Internal Eternal Inferno*

extinguished? It's weird that I can tell they're being secretive, right? Considering they don't have expressions. Why are they all wearing trench coats?

Not all of Olly's work follows this style (see for example, "Plague" and "Hive" on the next page), but it does seem to be his most pervasive. While I very much enjoy "Plague," "Hive," and Olly's other more contemporary takes on science fiction and horror, I prefer his ability to reach back into genre art's past and make it new. I can't tell you how many times I've looked at his piece "MenOfTheSky," and turned it in my mind. I *won't* tell you how many derivative versions of a *Twilight Zone* episode I have written inside my head while doing so.

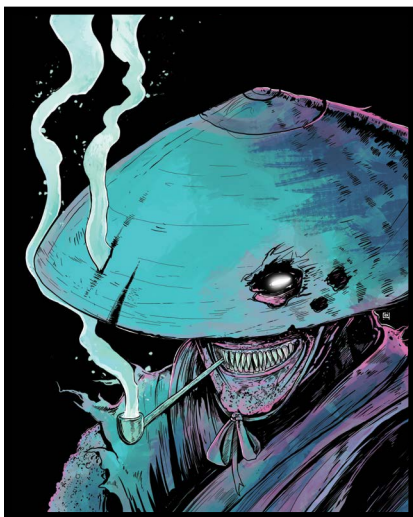
Another theme of Olly's artwork that intrigues me is the juxtaposition of life and death, with humans often acting the part of death, or succumbing to its power, and nature acting the part of life, often reclaiming the void left in the wake of man's demise. In "Gone," an abandoned space suit lies like a corpse upon a bed of flowers. In "LoSt," a human skull sealed inside a glass helmet is wrapped in a wild overgrowth of ivy. The skull's body, however, still poses as if alive, as if the vines are now in control, the helmet a sentient terrarium, the skull host to a new way of life.

Maybe Olly is saying that in this crazy messed-up world of ours where man is often pitted against nature and/or other men and/or himself, it only stands to reason that he be painted as the villain. But as Hitchcock once said, "The more successful the villain, the more successful the picture."



Pictured left: *TOGOWHERENOONEHASGONEBEFORE*

Right: *MenOfTheSky*



Pictured top: *Gone* Bottom left: *Plague* Bottom right: *Hive*



Pictured above: *LoSt*





A TWISTED RUN

by [Guy McDonnell](#)

“**T**ake it, you little shit.” Crusty pulls me close, so’s I gots to look up. “Take it.”
I only gots three socks, and it’s my best one. It’s got Twist in it. Don’t want it. Gots to take it.

He has me by the neck. Fingers touch in back. Shakes me hard, so’s my teeth rattle. His breath is everywhere. My stomach flops. Fight not to puke on his shoes.

“You let him go!” Mom claws at his wrist.

Crusty slaps her hard, so’s she bounces off the wall. Lands in the corner. Bleeding. Throws me to the ground. Kicks me in the ribs. I roll away.

“Be back afore the sun lights the curtain, worm.” He takes a step toward me.

I crawl for the door, quick-like. Try to get my breath back. Stumble into the alley, almost into the path of an Eye. Flatten out against the shanty wall. Hate him. Hate myself cause I’m crying like a little baby. Do it, quiet like. If’n the Eye finds me, I’m straight for the hole. That I’m nine don’t mean nothing. Twist is the worst drug.

The Eye floats above the rooftop so’s it don’t see me. It warbles by, and I step into the alley. Bite my lip some so’s I stop crying. The sun’s just coming over the shanty’s roof. Gives me ’bout twelve slices afore it shines on the tattered door curtain.

If'n I ain't back afore that happens, Crusty will rage. Beat Mom. Not a little bit, like just now. Maybe even kill her dead. She ain't much, and I guess I ain't, neither. But all we gots's each other, so's I can't let that happen.

Someday I'll be big. Then I'm killing the fat stinking pig dead...I swear.

Not Today. Today I deliver to Razor. He gots a great name. Not like Crusty, but every man I know that got named gots a stupid one. Men that pick their own gots great names.

Afore someone names me sumptin stupid, I'm gonna pick my own man-name. I swear.

It's early and the sweat's already in my eyes. Trash heaps piled next to our alley walls stink bad. Like rotting food and maybe a dead, bloated body. The flies is biting. Toward the back of the alley, the stink gets thicker. Sticks to my tongue.

I stop just afore the alley's blocked. Make sure no one's gonna see. Drop to my knees. Carrying Twist means I can't go through Sector 3 like normal. Instead, I gots to run the ruins so's I need protection.

I make a clean spot for the Sock on the asphalt with my shirt. Reach into the hole used for dumping shit pots. Feel for where the Stick sits, hid on a ledge. It's 'bout as long as my elbow to my wrist. It fits my hand just right. Gots a nail that pokes out. Them I hit with it mostly let go so's I can run. Them that don't, I hit again. Then they let go, sure 'nuff.

My hand grabs for the Stick as a warble comes up the alley. Ain't no good reason to be on my knees in front of the hole. I jerk and fumble the Stick. It slips out of my hand. I try to grab it, quick-like. Miss. It falls into the muck with a splat. Take a chance. Lay on my belly and hang into the hole to reach it.

The warbling gets louder. I dive behind the nearest trash heap gagging, quiet-like. My heart's racing so hard my ears pound. Wait for the Eye to go by me. The warbling fades afore it does. It must have been an old one. They're loud. I wish the government got rid of them when the new quiet ones come. That way, they'd all sound the same.

I use my hand to scrape some of the sludge off the Stick. Poke the nail through my pants so's the stick goes down inside my pant leg. Keep the Sock clean.

Since I gots to run the ruins, twelve slices ain't 'nuff time. Quick-like, I move down the alley. My new shoes squeak and bite at my ankles some 'cause they're too big. But can't complain; they was free. Gots them off Stilts McGee afore the Body Collectors come. Gots to fight to keep them, but that's okay. They make me a big shot with the kids.

I gets to the main street, quick-like. Step out and tug the shirt of the first man I sees. He turns. Tries to cuff me for being bold, like I knowed he would. I dodge easy. Wipe off most of the sludge on my hand onto his shirt, like I planned. It's what he gets for trying to hit me. It don't help much, but my hand won't be too crusty when it dries. And, it's funny. I skip away, laughing loud. Almost running 'cause there's no time. Dodge through the crowd. Too-big shoes slap sometimes.

Each Eye that warbles by slows the crowd and me. For each one, I gots to be next to someone dressed in rags, like me. I creep along with them so's it looks like I belong. Most of the folk's poor. Lots are women going to get their oat rations. I'm small for my age. Look like a little kid. So's it's easy. Each Eye makes my heart beat faster, 'cause the sun's getting closer to when Crusty beats Mom.

The street starts to close in. There's lots of shops here. Poles stick out. Hold pieces of cloth that shade each shop door. They push the crowd closer together. The door shade colors is bright. Not like the faded door curtains for shanties. Some of the shops only gots one room. Their shade's the door for the night. Others gots two rooms with real doors. Them's the ones won't even let me in.

I'm almost to the entrance of the ruins. The street has widened again. An Eye's arrest siren comes. Everybody freezes. I unfreeze, quick-like. The warble's coming from in front of me. I step to hide in the skirts of a fat lady.

"You!" the Eye's voice comes. "Show your ID."

I can't see who the Eye's after 'cause of the fat lady. Don't matter none, there'll be a bright green light shining down on them. They needs to be holding their right hand up, showing their ID tattoo. If'n you're over twelve, you gots to have one on your right palm. If'n you don't, you die, quick-like. Kids in Sector 3, like me, don't need one. But we needs to be registered so's they knows when to give us a tattoo. There's a tale that things is different in the city. No one knows for sure, 'cause no one from here gets to go there.

"Noncompliance will be met with extreme prejudice." The voice is louder, hurts my ears. "Citizens will clear the area."

The sound of sobs comes as people move. The woman hiding me steps back onto my too-big shoe, pinning me.

She turns. Snatches my arm, shaking me. "What're you doing, boy?"

I stick my chest out. "Nothing."

"You stink bad, go do nothing somewhere else." She shoves me away, hard.

My too-big shoes make me stumble into an open space in the crowd. Can't try to duck away. It'll make the Eye scan me. Move both hands behind my

back. Hide the Sock. Try to stand natural-like. If'n the Eye notices, if'n I get caught, straight to the hole, and Mom'll be all alone with Crusty.

"You have five seconds to comply." The Eye's voice hurts my ears even more.

I can just see the Eye's green light shining down on them it caught. A flash that makes me see stars, with a sharp crack, comes from the Eye. The smell of seared meat makes my mouth water. My belly cramps 'cause I ain't ate since yesterday morning. I only ever had meat once. Got beat good for stealing it, too. I'll never forget. It was my best food ever.

The Eye floats toward me. Stops. I knows it's looking at me. Stare back, mean-like. I guess it don't think I'm hiding sumptin 'cause it moves on. I do too. I pass by the body. Don't want to look at it through the looters. Do anyways.

It's a girl, way older than me. Not as old as Mom. Her right hand shows her palm. It ain't got no ID. There's a hole burned straight through her chest. It's what'cha get when you're old with no tattoo and an Eye scans you. Her green eyes are flat, stare at nothing. Look sorta like Mom's. The Body Collectors will come soon. Then it'll be like she never was. I wish I knowed what she did to get scanned. Then I'd know one more thing not to do.

When I get older, I'm killing the Eye's dead, I swear.

No more Eyes come afore I gets to the entrance to the ruins. The sun has moved. It's 'nuff my heart goes to thundering. Glad I didn't take time to pick any pockets. I had twelve slices afore it lit the door curtain. Now all I gots is 'bout nine.

Normally, if'n I run Sector 3, it takes two slices to get to Razor's. I gots no idea how many it's gonna take now. I might die in the ruins. Miss the delivery. That's an idea. I could just not show. Then Razor'd kill the fat pig. But, probably not afore Crusty killed Mom. I don't know what I'd do without her, so's I really gots no choice.

The belly flies is buzzing some. Just a few steps into the alley, it seems Sector 3 ain't no more. The air smells different. Tastes different. The plywood walls is green, not yellow. The asphalt has little pits in it, and is almost white.

I ease down the alley. Listen so hard the blood rushes in my ears. Get the Stick ready, just in case. The alley jogs just ahead, around a shanty. I peek past the corner. See nothing. Move forward. Sumptin rattles. Hold the Stick ready. The belly flies buzz harder. The rattle comes again. I get ready to swing, then gots to laugh, quiet-like. It's just one wall of the shanty moving in the wind. Not a Twisted. I'm glad. Need to hit the Twisted with the nail lots, or they won't let go.

Them that's Twisted ain't a threat to the government. They hide here in the ruins. Only care 'bout Twist. They kill folk dead they catch that ain't hooked on it, like them. The tales tell it's how they get money for Twist. I guess nobody cares about them the Twisted kill dead. Ain't nothing done 'bout it, and the Eyes don't fly here.

I hurry past the crooked shanty door 'cause there ain't no time. Stop where the alley ends at a wide street. It's clear. Up the street is an alley headed in Razor's direction. There ain't no Twisted, so's I go, quick-like. Don't quite run 'cause of my slapping shoes. I turn into the alley. Ready to swing. It's empty but for a dead body. I duck in, and I go. The alley's long and narrow. Snakes around between the backs of two rows of shanties. Like it weren't planned.

I come around a bend. My belly sinks 'bout to my knees. The way out's blocked. Ain't no going back 'cause at least a slice is gone. Coming to the block, it's a tumbled shanty. I grab one of the edges. Pull hard to get it open 'nuff to see. The wall squeals. The belly flies set to buzzing again 'cause the Twisted follow noise. I bite my teeth together. Swallow hard against my flopping belly. Hold my breath. Listen. Hear nothing but blood rushing.

If'n I can get in, the door on the other side's open. It's a real crazy thing, but I put my foot against one wall. Use the Stick to pry the other. The wall pops, coming away some. I fall. Head bounces off the asphalt. The world spins. I lay there a minute. Wait for the throbbing to stop. The whole shanty groans in the wind. Might finish tumbling. I'm up afore it can. Grab the Stick. Slide through the opening I made. Crawl over pieces of the roof to get to the door. Look out. The street's clear of Twisted both ways. My luck's still up.

In one direction, piles of junk I wish I could loot block the street. The other way, there's an alley mouth headed toward Razor's. A Twisted gimps around the corner at the end of the street.

He looks crazier than anyone I ever seen afore. Hair sticking out everywhere, but bald in lots of places. Eyes red, even from here. Pant leg all black-like from dried blood. He's carrying sumptin long, maybe a board. Sees me. His face screws up like Crusty's when he rages. Teeth got lots of gaps.

Even with the Stick, I ain't got time for him. I put on speed. Duck into the alley mouth. Run straight into a different Twisted. We fall to the ground all tangled up. Somehow, she ends up on top. Pins me good. I fight. Squirm hard. Try to get the Stick out. She's clawing at the Sock. Starts to hoot.

My heart pounds so loud I can barely hear. I breathe fast. Her smell tastes worse than the shit hole. She lifts up. Lets go of my Stick arm. Goes to poking

at my eyes. Gouges my forehead. Grabs the Sock. Pulls. I gots to stop her. Grab the Stick close to the nail. Start stabbing anywhere. Everywhere.

She yowls like I ain't never heard afore. Rolls to the side. I wiggle out from under her. Jump up. Back away. Wipe the blood from my eyes. The alley's a dead end.

The Twisted is on her knees. I'm breathing fast. Head floats some. I swing the Stick hard as I can.

Crack!

She hits the pavement. Maybe not breathing.

The Stick caught the Twisted on the side of the head. She's bleeding a puddle through matted brown hair. Don't matter none. Gots no time. The gimp Twisted gots to be close. I wipe the blood outta my eyes again. Only hope's to run. I do.

Head outta the alley, quick-like. The gimp Twisted's right there. I gots just 'nuff time to dodge his swing.

I fall back. Land on the bone that starts my ass crack. Pain shoots up to my neck. Can't move. He holds the board high and yowls. Takes another swing. I try to block the board with the Stick. See half of it is gone. The board clips my shoulder. The half-stick falls.

I scoot back, quick-like. He holds the board high and yowls again. Two more Twisted come around the corner, running. I gots to go.

Now!

I scramble up. Duck his swing. Can't think. Arm numb. Know I'm gonna get killed dead. Run hard. Run fast. New shoes sound out.

Slap. Slap. Slap.

Two more slices is gone. The Stick is gone. Ain't good. I only gots six slices left afore Crusty might take Mom from me. All of the Twisted is yowling. Gimp is waving the board.

Gots no protection. Gots no choice. Going over the junk piles is my only hope. Use a bloated body for a step. It pops. My foot sinks in some. Hardly notice the stink.

Climb over the top, quick-like. Junk starts to fall down the other side. Takes me with it. Get stabbed by sumptin. Rips my pants. Rips me.

Hit hard. Get up. Heart's trying to come through my chest. Can't feel pain no more. Can't think. Just gots to get out. Run fast. Run blind. Don't care where I'm going.

Slap. Slap. Slap.

There was this God Man once. Come into Sector 3. Teached praying, fixed everything. So's I tried. Prayed my Dad weren't killed dead. Prayed

Mom didn't need to let men use her so's we could eat. Neither worked. It don't matter, though. I'm praying that each alley I take won't be blocked. Each alley won't have a Twisted.

Slap. Slap. Slap.

My shoes sound so loud, I want to slow down. Be quiet. My side's stitched, bad. Breath comes hard now. Keep running anyways. There ain't much time left. Keep praying. It must be working 'cause I think I see Sector 3. Think I see people. Try to put on speed. Tired.

Slap. Slap. Slap.

A Twisted comes outta nowhere. Slams me. Bounce off the wall. Take two drunk steps. Bounce off the ground. Crawl fast.

He grabs the back of my pants. Pulls me to him. Flips me over. Slaps me so's stars explode. Grabs my throat. Squeezes.

I fight. Hard. Don't help. Start to see red. Then black. Go limp. He eases up. Goes for the Sock. I stick my finger in his eye. Get lucky. Poke it good. He screams. Lets go. I scoot away. Turn. Gasping.

Start to run afore I stand. His footsteps is right behind me. Run faster. Think I taste Sector 3. It's right there. Smell his breath. He gets ahold of my shirt. It tears off me as I dive outta the ruins. Crawl across the street. He don't follow.

I stand. Put my hands on my knees. Shake. Breathe for two or three. Shake more. Hurt. Everywhere. Mad I lost the Stick. Had to trade 'bout everything I had for it. Won't get another. Don't matter none, I ain't never running the ruins again. Crusty can do it hisself.

That ain't really true on account he'd probably kill Mom dead, but I sure want it to be.

I gots 'bout three slices left afore Crusty rages. Might be 'nuff. Run again. Try to forget the pain. Blood squishes in my shoe. Head for Razor's territory where the Eyes never fly. Get there, quick-like.

Razor's alley's lots cleaner. He likes clean. Makes all his folk take baths, even the runners. I don't remember the last bath I had.

"Hey, it's Bobby," I croak, my throat hurting. "Gots a package for Razor." If'n you don't call out, you might get killed dead.

Slinky—he's another one got named—steps out from behind the bend. "Give it over."

He watches Razor's door. Thinks it makes him a big man. He's lots older. But scrawny, like he ate less than even me afore he come to Razor.

"Nope, goes to Razor."

"What if I take it?" he sneers.

My heart goes to pounding again. Everything that was hurting, hurts worse. Get mad.

I clench my fists. Take a step forward. "You want it? You gotta take it. If'n you can." Breathe hard. Tense. Won't back down.

His eyebrows go up. "Geez kid, calm down. Since it means so much to ya, give it to Razor yerself. Was just offering to help."

He leads me down the alley. The only steel door in Sector 3's at the end. It tells everyone Razor's rich. There's a room on the other side of the door. It gots a plywood bench and bucket of rags. I sit and cover my shoes so's I don't get nothing on the floor. Stand and nod at Slinky.

"How come your pants is all bloody?"

I shrug. Slinky opens the door. The air's cold, and like always, I don't believe my eyes. The ceiling's real high, like the tales tell of the first buildings. But there ain't no floor for the upper part. Razor gots to be crazy for having one this high. All the first buildings tumbled. Ain't no one in Sector 3 to put them back up. I guess Razor ain't worried, 'cause he put color on the walls.

The front part's yellow, and the back by Razor's blue. Ain't nobody gots colored walls. He gots a big table, too, against the far wall. Made from sumptin shiny. Gots ten chairs with backs around it. Far as I know, ain't no more chairs with backs in Sector 3.

Afore coming here, I never seen a table. Had to ask what it was. At the other end of the room's a huge desk. Razor sits there. I had to ask what that was, too.

I walk toward it. Pass windows on the walls. Show places that ain't real 'cause you can't reach through and touch them. My favorite has a bird with lots of colors and a hooked beak. Wish I could touch it.

I stop in front of the desk and wait. Try to be still. Even though Crusty's gonna rage at Mom soon, hurrying Razor's a real bad idea.

Two slivers is lost when Razor finally looks up and his nose wrinkles. "Bobby, damn...you stink. What'cha got?"

I swallow so's my voice works. "From Crusty." I toss him my Sock.

He catches it. "In a sock? Fucking Crusty, what a waste." He empties the Twist into his left hand. "How come it weren't in your pocket?"

"Crusty cut them out so's I can't hide nothing."

He glances at my shirtless body, and then studies my face. "Come through the ruins?"

I nod like it ain't nothing. The scabs is tight on my forehead, and my leg pounds with my heart. Blood's still running into my shoe.

"The ruins," he whistles through his teeth, low. "Good job kid, but you always do good. Never been short or nothing since you started."

I don't say nothing. Razor's a big man. I mean *big*. He ain't like Crusty. His belly don't stick over his pants and jiggle. He ain't got but one chin. He gives me shakes. When he walks, the ground moves.

"I ain't never give you nothing, have I?" He leans forward. "You want something?"

"My Sock."

"Your sock?" He laughs, long and loud. "You can do better."

My heart races. Sweat comes on my forehead, quick-like, even though it's cold. Makes the gouges sting.

This is it. The chance I need. There's no way to tell if'n my luck's back. If'n it ain't, I'll get beat good for being bold. But this might be my only chance...ever. I'm asking for sumptin to help Mom with Crusty.

"Okay. A Pointer." It ain't as good as a knife, but is lots easier to hide.

All of a sudden, he's serious. His black eyes intense. "Why?"

I got to look down. "No reason."

"Bullshit, Bobby. Look at me."

I do, and I'm pinned in his stare.

"You gonna point Crusty?"

I don't answer, but it must show.

"Fuck, boy. You miss, you die. But I know he don't treat you or your mom right. You standing for yourself?"

I stand straight and tall. Hold Razor's stare. See Mom safe instead of him. So's I'm steady when I nod.

"Slinky, give him a Pointer, a good one, and a jug."

"A jug?" I ask.

"Yeah. It's his time, but this is all the help you get. If you're strong 'nuff to do this, you 'n your mom gotta place with me, and you know what that means. If you're not—" his stare pins me again. "You know what that means, too."

If I do it, Mom don't get hurt no more just so's we can eat. And I get my man-name. But I got to take a bath. If'n I don't, won't matter none.

I'm out the door, quick-like, afore he changes his mind. Thread the Pointer through my pant leg. I ain't carrying Twist, so's I ain't gotta run the ruins. Means it'd normally take about two slices to get back. But I only got about a slice left. Then Crusty rages.

If'n I walk, the Eyes won't scan me, but I'll be late, sure. If'n I run and get scanned, it'll be like I walked. The Eyes don't care much 'bout little kids, so's I try to run.

There ain't many people in the streets. It's a good thing. I'm real tired.

Can't run as fast as I want 'cause of my leg. Try hard. Only a couple slivers left afore Mom gets hurt.

My shoulder aches deep. Makes it hard to move that arm for balance. Means I can't dodge good, like normal. My too-big shoes feel giant. Make me trip. Can't drop the jug.

I come around the corner into our alley. Side stitched bad. My belly falls away. Throat turns to ash. A cold sweat comes, making me shiver. The sun's shining on the curtain. Crusty's raging echoes off the alley walls. In between the echoes, dull thumps of his fists beating Mom. Pounding, fierce-like. My fault, again. I'm late. She don't even grunt. Only makes it worse.

Hold the jug tight. Got shakes. Might drop it. Breathe for a couple. Gots to be brave. Gots to save Mom.

I step into the room, yell, "Crusty!"

He turns. Goes silent. Pig eyes red. Crazy. His hair sticks out in all directions. The yellow crust on his skin flakes off when he moves toward me.

"Wait! Look what Razor sent. Said you done good." I hold up the jug.

His eyes go wide. Like the alchie he is, he lunges. Rips it from my hand. Tips it back, quick-like. His middle chin bobs with each gulp. Flakes float through the air.

He looks down at me, growls, "Out."

I duck through the curtain and around the corner. He'll be drooling, quick-like. Then I'm saving Mom and getting my man-name.

It don't take but a slice afore Crusty's snores shake the plywood walls. I slide into the room. Mom's curled in the corner. Looks at me with her dead eyes. Her face bloody with new bruises over old. Hurt's me somehow. I put a finger to my lips. Point at Crusty. Her eyes widen. She shakes her head, hard. Starts to get up. I wave my hand at her, fast. She sits back down. Eyes shiny with tears.

She only looks like that when I'm 'bout to get hurt, bad. I can't pay her no mind. Scared enough. Walk on my tiptoes, silent-like. Creep up on him across the dirt floor. If'n he hears me, he'll be up, quick-like. We're all like that, so's you don't get killed dead.

I cross between the door and him. Takes at least forever. He stops snoring. Turns to his side. I freeze. The belly flies is trying to make me shit myself. I knows he's coming to. I knows he hears my heart.

I'm done for. I wait. Hardest thing ever. Don't breathe. Mom breathes faster. His snores start again. Let my breath out too loud. He keeps snoring.

I bite my lip so's I'm real quiet. Kneel next to him. Pull the Pointer. It's steel. The shaft's half as long as my forearm. Narrows to a point. Some calls it an Icepick. Draws blood from my finger, easy.

Like I done it afore. Like I rate. I hold the Pointer over his ear. Drive it down. Never been this scared. Gots to save Mom. Try too hard. Miss. Scrape the side of his head. His eyes open. Red. Not seeing yet. My brain freezes. He's reaching for me.

Hear Mom sob. My brain lets go. A scream starts deep inside. I stab down again. Miss. Stab again. The Pointer slides into his ear hole.

The scream comes out. Don't sound like me. I lean in with everything I gots, screaming. It goes deeper, like my finger into gruel. Stops. The shakes wiggle the Pointer, hard. Scramble his brains good. He jerks. Twitches.

I pull the Pointer out. Comes easy. The hole don't bleed but a little. Piss spreads away from him. Room starts to stink like the shit hole. I feel funny cause we're maybe gonna be okay. Laugh at him lying on the floor in the piss puddle. Spit on him. Stand up and kick him. Smile at Mom. In the end, the pig weren't nothing.

I'll tell Razor true next time I see him. It was easy. I like how it makes me feel. Do it again, anytime.

Mom's got tears shining on her face. Her eye's ain't dead no more. She gots shakes.

"It's okay, Mom. Razor's gonna take care of us. I'll tell him my man-name is Havak Jagan, like you said Dad's was. But I'm gonna be called Ice."

She crawls across the room. Grabs me in a big hug. Shakes me while she shakes.

"Oh, Bobby, that's fine, just fine," she sobs.

I squirm to get away. Feel all funny inside, soft-like. She don't let go. I guess it's okay. It's been forever since she held me.

I forgot I kinda like it.





RIDE THE SNAKE

by [Claudine Griggs](#)

The children were regimented from morning until night, as were their parents, for the governing elders discovered long ago that scripted routines diminished all varieties of excess and deficiency. Today, however, a citizen of the fourth grade at Huxley Academy would become singularly distinct during an encounter with one of thirteen remaining South American anacondas.

“Boys and girls,” said the announcer, as the children entered the climate-controlled tropics around the center stage of an intimate auditorium, “please take your seats.”

Forced hot air brushed the children’s faces. Ancient continental birds and insects sang from hidden speakers. And the overall effect made one of the students think of a hellish fable from ancient literature.

“Listen to nature’s discord,” said the soft-spoken male announcer. “Notice the uncomfortable warmth and humidity. Imagine aboriginals plagued by disease, famine, and ethnic warfare. These early Amazonians—we can’t really call them men and women—struggled for food and shelter, sometimes murdering others in the process. These early hominoids fared hardly better than domesticated animals.”

The surround sound suddenly wailed with New World primates, buzzed with wasps and mosquitoes, and growled with a South American jaguar. The children squirmed in

their seats, but one precocious boy, age nine, bolder than the rest, whispered, "The Stone Age. Do not fear a dead past."

The announcer heard through his earpiece and responded. "Yes, boys and girls. Modern civilization has conquered nature and the baser impulses of its dominant species. Social unification has created security and abundance, and we no longer have with us the poor, the halt, and the blind. But today, this purposeful day, you shall witness a palpable demonstration of the modern versus the ancient."

The children shrieked with delight, and then, with side glances, internally questioned the propriety of such exuberance. However, they did not ponder this long or deeply, because the main event rolled onto the stage: a thirty-foot anaconda, sixteen inches in diameter at midsection, which lay in a glass enclosure lined with straw, a lavishly protected creature whose only hardship was boredom. The children *oooh'd* and *aaah'd*, knowing that they were safe now, but that seven hundred years ago, the Amazonians were not. How odd, and how glorious.

After waiting for the squeals and whispers to taper, the moderator swept his arm across the crowd of one hundred and one children. "And now," he proclaimed, "someone will be allowed a personal encounter with our reptilian guest. ONE of you shall revisit living antiquity. Do I have a volunteer?"

The credentialed orator, ten credentialed teachers, and ten credentialed assistants had to wait less than a second. Every child's hand shot into the air. "Me! Me! Me!" reverberated through the auditorium, small arms swaying for attention.

The moderator waited a prescribed length of time, pacing back and forth across the stage, smiling, gesturing toward the serpent, then the audience, and then the serpent once more. The excitement became thunderous.

"ME! ME! ME!"

Finally, he pointed to a girl, age seven, not quite as strong or pretty as the rest, but just as enthusiastic. She yelped and bounced toward the artificial meadow, glancing at her teacher to be assured the bounce was permissible.

A hidden directional microphone automatically swiveled toward the child, now standing twelve feet from the beast's enclosure. "And what's your name?" asked the announcer.

"Malika Oleander Principle," said the girl. "I stand for unity and abundance."

"Well, Malika," said the moderator, "are you ready for a unique experience? Something your classmates will admire?"

"Yes!" said Malika.

"Do you think *you* can handle it?"

“Oh, yes!” shouted Malika.

“Then,” said the moderator to his audience, “let’s watch bold Malika confront the ANA-CON-DA!”

This time, the children jumped and screeched without glancing at their teachers, and none was louder than Malika. She had been selected for special treatment. How odd, and how glorious.

“Are you ready!?” asked the announcer with carnival cadence.

“We are ready!” said Malika, shoulders back, as if society depended on her.

The anaconda began to test the enclosure, looking for an expected opening, and one hundred children vocalized their astonishment. It lived.

“Malika,” said the announcer, “we recommend silence as you face the serpent.” The command was unnecessary, because when a transparent panel slid away from the cage, Malika was paralyzed with a strange and distinctly unpleasant sensation. She had never experienced fear before.

Recognizing the child-scented air, the anaconda glided to the floor. It was much larger than the children imagined.

Malika stared motionless as a forked tongue flicked the air. At first, the serpent turned in the direction of the announcer, who flashed a corrective laser across its brow. The head then snapped toward the girl, followed by one hundred gasps of air.

“The anaconda is a mindless primitive,” said the moderator. “Malika is not. What do you think will happen?”

Malika did not know the answer, but she was civilized, all right. She belonged to the One Society of a Golden Age.

The snake inched toward the child. Seven feet away. Then five. A spotlight focused between Malika and the anaconda, and then the creature laid eyes upon the girl.

With jungle quickness, the beast struck, sinking ancient teeth into the modern shoulder of a forty-five-pound child. Malika screamed as no one outside the auditorium had screamed in seven hundred years. The serpent coiled the child to center stage while Malika kicked and cried for help. The other children watched in obedient silence.

Malika began choking on half words, and the snake constricted as hard as the springs of an Auschwitz boxcar. Soon there was no sound, no breath, no heartbeat from the child. Then began a reptilian swallow that seemed to last for hours; and finally, as the last edge of Malika’s left sole passed into the snake, the auditorium went dark for ten seconds. When the lights came up, the serpent, cage, and child were gone.

Speech slowly returned to the children, and the brave, precocious boy asked, "What happened to Malika?"

"She is with the anaconda," said the announcer.

"But she's all right?" suggested a girl, confused.

"Malika is dead," replied the announcer.

"That can't happen," said the boy. "This is some kind of trick!"

The other children nodded and began to giggle, suspecting an elaborate hoax.

"But where is Malika?" asked another, still unsure.

"I told you," said the announcer. "Malika died. Do you doubt your eyes?"

Now the children were distraught. What had they seen? They looked to their teachers, who offered no immediate clue about today's lesson.

"Impossible!" declared the courageous boy, standing.

"It *is* possible," replied the announcer, "for the good of the majority—and with consent of the martyr...and her parents. Surely you understand the concept of sacrifice. You studied it in first grade."

The boy looked skeptical. "I think you're lying, Mister!"

His teacher cast a sharp glance. "You may never speak that way to an Overseer!"

The boy did not back down. He liked Malika and felt a curious protectiveness toward her. "If he isn't a liar," said the boy, cocking his head with illicit independence, "why did Malika scream and fight?"

The teacher smiled, nodding at the announcer, who in turn smiled at the audience.

"Boys and girls," said the speaker. "Our Doubting Thomas apparently believes that Malika, a daughter of the Golden Age, was as primitive as the serpent, concerned merely for her own existence."

The audience was silent.

"Well?" asked the announcer. "Was she?"

"No," said several children unconvincingly.

Another asked, "But, sir, why did she cry? It was awful!"

The announcer gestured with outstretched palms covered in Malika's blood. "To offer a more realistic demonstration, that you might truly understand the benefits of our civilization. Boys and girls, Malika died for you. Each of you."

Sighs of relief filled the auditorium, followed by high-pitched giggles as the children began to understand. That was the lesson. To make them question the wisdom of their superiors. The notion was as preposterous as it was shaming, a fool's illusion generated by lack of faith in the One Society.

A girl laughed. "You played a trick!"

Another child smiled at her teacher. "This was the *best* field trip ever!"

"In the future," said the announcer, compassionately, "I hope you will doublethink before mistrusting our governors. And if you are ever confused, you might, at minimum, remember and honor the memory of Malika Oleander Principle, whose unselfish community spirit was demonstrated so compellingly this day."

The children broke into spontaneous applause, reinforced by the teachers. After a few moments, they began to chant. "Ma-lee-ka! Ma-lee-ka! We love Ma-lee-ka!"

The Overseer smiled. He bowed stage left, right, and center, repeating the cycle until the ovation began to diminish. Then he panned the audience, offering his applause to the children, who cheered themselves.

"We're the One! We're the One! We're the One!"

Beneath the auditorium, a resting serpent sensed the vibrations of a Golden Age. And in the audience, a very special young boy smoldered with revolutionary understanding.





THE BLUE MAN

by [Dawn Lloyd](#)

I ain't going to say what happened to the blue man was the worst decision I ever made, but I reckon it's the one I'm least proud of.

It was about five years after the Blue Man Revolt, which was when the latest batch of criminals got hold of the shuttles and escaped before we could throw them out. Now, most of us ain't got nothing personal against the blue men. After all, our own great-grandparents were sent out here to Mars for being criminals just like them. But the dome's only fifteen kilometers across. That means when the Earthers dump in more, ain't nothing to do but throw them out the airlock and fight with the other domes over the shuttles.

Well, me and Thomson done finished our shift in the engine room when a motor in the hanger bay coughed like it was firing up. Weren't no one supposed to be out there, so we took off running.

It's awful hard to run with all the plexisteel scrap, though, and I don't run very good on account of having got my leg caught in a turbine a few years back. So, Thomson run way on ahead. He was standing by the Fortier shuttle, and there was something on the ground between him and the shuttle. I started jogging again and my boots made a clomping sound that almost sounded spooky on the concrete.

When I got up close, I saw it was a man lying there. Thomson was holding a plexisteel pipe with just one hand.

The bolt sticking out of the pipe was red, and the blood was all over his brown coveralls, too.

Thomson being strong didn't mean he was mean. I only ever seen him get mad once. It was back when the last batch of blue men knifed his wife when she was trying to lock down the hanger bay door. When they got away, he tore the door off its hinges and near on broke down the wall, too. He never talked about it after that, and I wasn't about to bring it up. But I still remember it same as if it was yesterday.

Well, I was awful surprised to see Thomson standing like that. The man's face was to the ground, so I asked. "What's going on?"

Thomson kicked him a good one and the guy rolled over on his side. There was a stream of blood running down from his head. Thomson jerked a thumb like I was supposed to recognize the body, but I never seen him before.

"Who's that?" I asked.

"Blue man."

My hand clenched a bit. "Earthers sending more? We already got rationing cycles." Everywhere but life support was having brownouts, and we were doing maintenance as fast as we could.

"Earthers didn't send him." Thomson poked his toe at the man's stomach which was covered by a fancy white shirt with long sleeves. The boot left red tread marks. "Reckon he got a shuttle." Thomson went on toeing the man's side. I wanted to tell him to stop, but I wasn't going to stick up for no blue man against one of our own, so I kept it to myself.

"He's from another dome?"

Thomson stared at me like I was an idiot. "Well, I'm pretty sure he ain't from the outside."

The man groaned some and then went quiet again. Thomson kicked and the body flopped over onto its back. It had red dust all over it.

"How you know he's a blue man?"

"Recognize him from the last batch."

"Been five years. How you know he was one of them?"

His voice got lower. "I recognize him."

I didn't much feel like pushing it, so I changed the subject. "So, what's he doing here?"

"Thief."

I snorted. "So, he come all the way here for a shuttle?"

He shrugged.

The man's hand moved a bit, and I thought about telling Thompson to lay off him. But instead, I said, "How you know what he was doing?"

Thomson pointed at the shuttle. There was a big place on the floor beside it that didn't have no dust. "He was taking it."

"So, he flew his shuttle out from some other dome just to take ours?"

Thomson's logic wasn't adding up. "Well, maybe he's here to get even. We run him out in the revolt, and now he come back to blast a hole through the dome."

The blue man opened his eyes like he was trying to answer, but they weren't focused. Thomson lifted the bar, but I held up a hand. "Hold on. He ain't no harm like this. Let's see what he says."

Thomson lowered the bar slow, but he held it in both hands like the man was going to jump up any minute. I stepped over him and sat down on the shuttle's landing claw. It wasn't my aim, but it meant we were on both sides of him. He put his hand up to guard his head.

"We don't take no blue men round here." Thomson crossed his arms, still holding the pipe. "So, what were you doing?"

"I'm not a blue man. I've been here for five years." His eyes went to me and stopped. "I'm working with the Vilq Dome Project."

"Ain't never heard of no Vilq Dome." Thomson uncrossed his arms and crossed them back the other way.

The man still held up his hand like he could block the pipe. "The dome is new. It's a collaborative effort among the domes in the southern hemisphere. Our goal is to keep it off the Earthers's radar so it can handle population overflow issues."

"We don't got no population issues since we don't take no blue men." Thomson leaned onto his other leg. "Besides, where'd you get the material?"

"We're using Dome One for scrap. We've also got the cargo ship that went down last year. The Earthers should assume we stripped it for the existing domes."

I jumped up and the shuttle claw rocked back. "A cargo ship went down?"

He breathed in and flinched. "It only had a skeleton crew, and there were no survivors, but it looked like they were going to start a new dome."

Thomson toed the man's hip, and I shut up.

"So, what's that got to do with you taking our shuttle?" Thomson asked.

"We came out in a two-man to ask your council to loan us your shuttles. They agreed to loan us your fortier. In exchange, Rawlings, he's the engineer who came with me, agreed to stay here and work on diagramming a generator upgrade that should solve the problems with the brownouts you've been having."

I sat back down wondering about letting an outsider upgrade our generator. "Easy enough to check his story." I shrugged. "Ain't far to Watkins's place, and he should be home by now."

Thomson's fist was white around the pipe. "Don't care."

"What you mean, you don't care?"

"Finally got me a blue man who was part of the last batch."

My mouth opened and stayed there for a minute. "He's the one who killed Kate?"

The man's eyes widened, and he waved his hands like he was saying no.

"No, but he was in the same batch."

The man waved his hands more. "You mean when we arrived? All I did was hide. I've got a wife of my own. I wouldn't dream of hurting anyone. I was sent out here for fraud, nothing..."

Thomson shut him up with a kick to the chest. "You got to the shuttles, didn't you?"

The man coughed blood.

I shrugged. "Just because he was here don't mean he did something."

Thomson raised a boot and stood there on one leg for a second before he looked back at me. "You're as good a friend as I got, Peters, but don't get in the middle of this." He brought the boot heel down hard on the man's stomach and the man gasped.

And there it was. I could stick by a friend or stand up for a blue man who was nothing to me.

I looked at the man, but he was coughing and gasping so much, I reckon he didn't know we were talking anyway.

"Go on and talk to Watkins." Thomson was holding the bar in his right hand again. "Bring him back here if you want him to know you didn't have nothing to do with it."

"But you said he wasn't the one who killed Kate."

"If it wasn't for that batch, she'd still be alive. Makes it his fault." He raised the bar up over his head. "Get out of here," he said to me. "Ain't no need for you to be here if you're going to go guilty about it."

The bar came down, and I watched. I could have fought. Could have even talked him down, maybe. But instead, I watched. It was just a blue man anyway.

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ART FEATURE

PURGATORIUM

Art by [Anthony Christopher](#)

Feature by Rob Carroll

I was locked up a couple times when I was fourteen,” artist, Anthony Christopher, recounts. “Once in a mental hospital for awhile, and the other was for an arrest. It was pretty dreadful, but I’m glad for the experiences.”

This is exactly the kind of soul-searching honesty I would expect from an artist who wrestles creatively with their demons in the way that Anthony does. His illustrated work, so fine in its detail, appears hellish at distance, but upon closer inspection you see that there is nothing really that horrific about what he creates. His work, more than anything, is contemplative.

That’s not to say his work is comforting. Anthony’s illustrations are dark, unsettling, and firmly rooted in the macabre, some much more so than others. But behind those pained and tortured eyes of his subjects lies a soul yearning for peace.

“I focus a lot on mental health,” Anthony says.

Anthony started drawing as a child after discovering the work of Todd McFarlane (best known as the ground-breaking creator of the comic book antihero, Spawn). He tells me how he would create scenes with his toys and draw them as best he could. He was a fan of the horror genre at an early age and would spend weekends with rented VHS tapes of classic horror films.

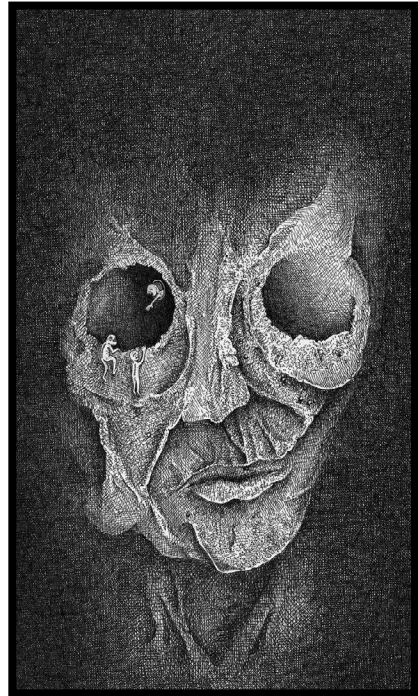
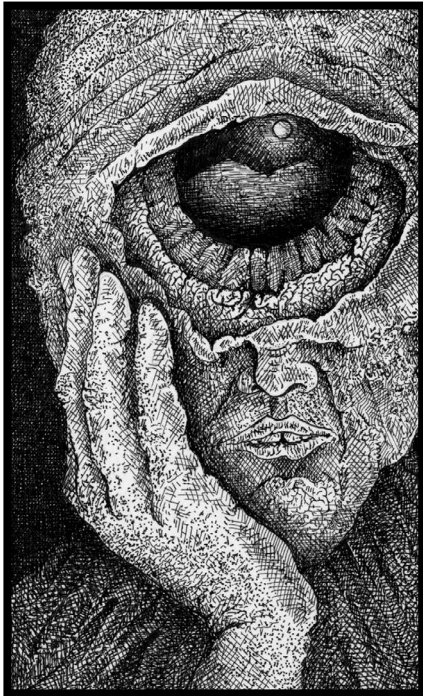
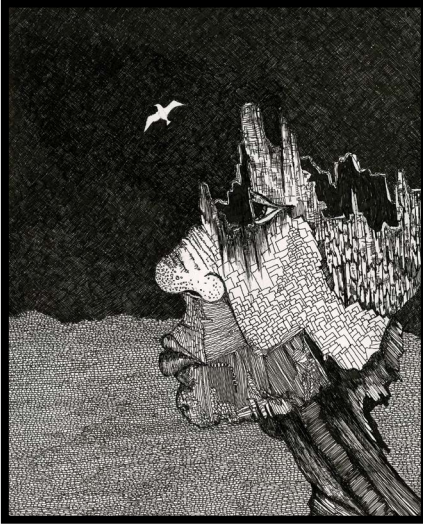
Pictured left: *Supernova*

The original *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) remains his favorite. As an adult, however, his inspiration is rooted deeper in reality.

“Take a look at the shittiest and cheapest bar that’s near you,” says Anthony. “I get a lot of inspiration from hanging out in places like that. Tons of characters, desperation, people in need of affirmation, and a lot of laughs to be had. I believe these places to be a source of creative bliss.”

Anthony’s use of the word “bliss” strikes me immediately. It’s so counterpoint to the world he’s describing, yet I’m convinced it’s an absolute truth, the kind that Hemingway referred to when he said, “...write one true sentence. The truest thing that you know.”

Almost all art is sourced from pain. But from pain also comes love, or “laughs,” as Anthony describes.



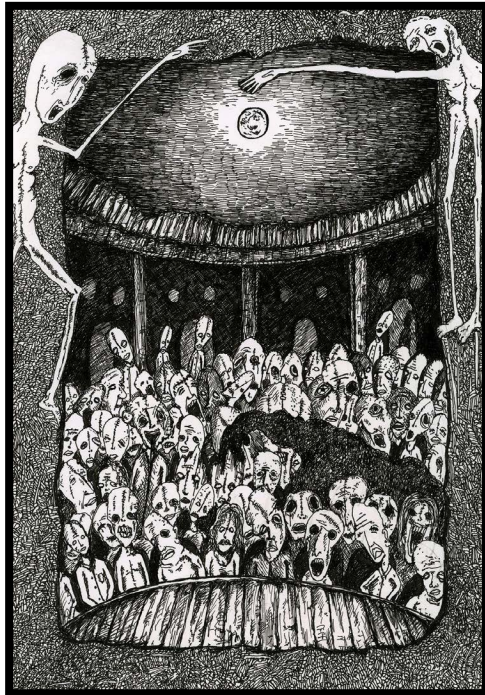
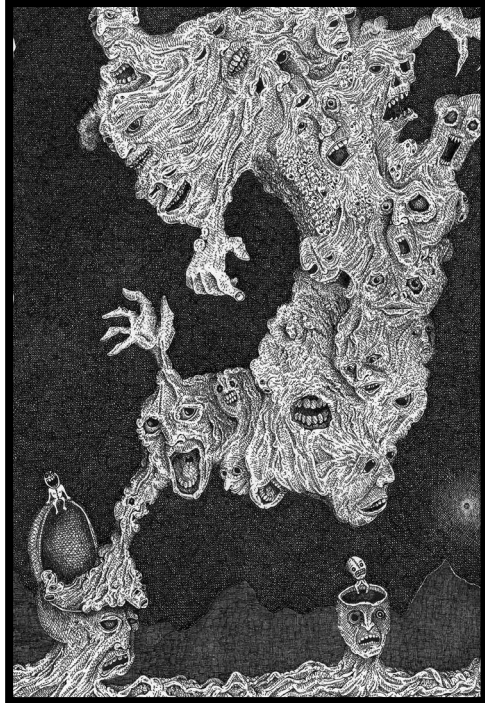
Pictured top: *Free* **Bottom left:** *Daydreaming*
Bottom right: *Searching for Something Better*

I don't think it's coincidence that much of Anthony's work is stargazing—looking up, or out upon some unseen horizon. And I don't think it's coincidence that many of his subjects are trapped in rigid prisons, or that some have become forced spectators to their own lives, or that some are literally bursting at the seams with anxiety.

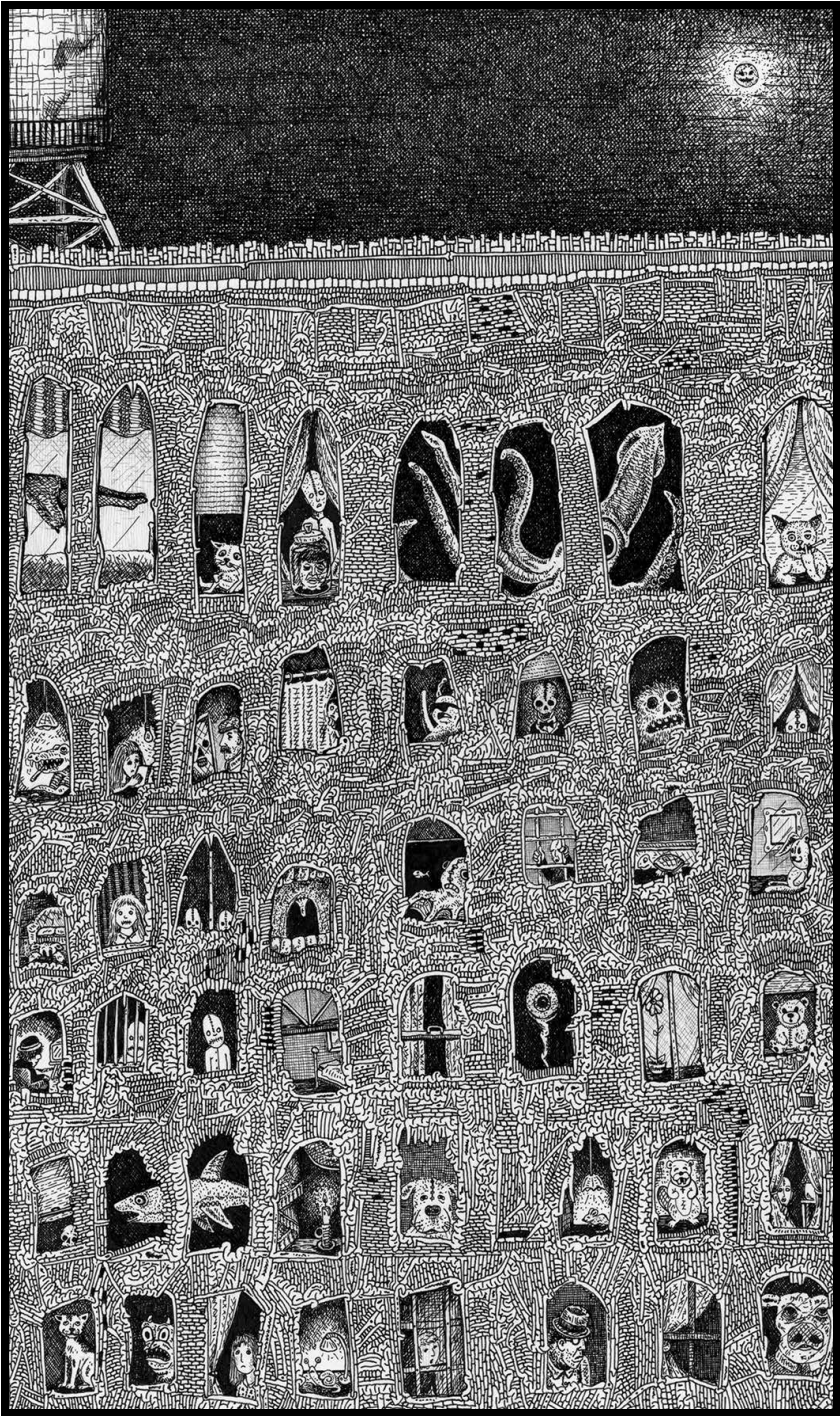
Anthony understands that humans are imperfect blends of vice and virtue, diadems of what can and cannot be, but the marvelous part is that because we are made this way, we will always have opportunity to grow, to transform, to ascend.

In *Purgatorio*, the second cantica in Dante Alighieri's, *The Divine Comedy*, Dante describes purgatory as a mountain upon which mankind climbs to attain spiritual growth. Anthony's work reminds of the opening to the cantica's first canto:

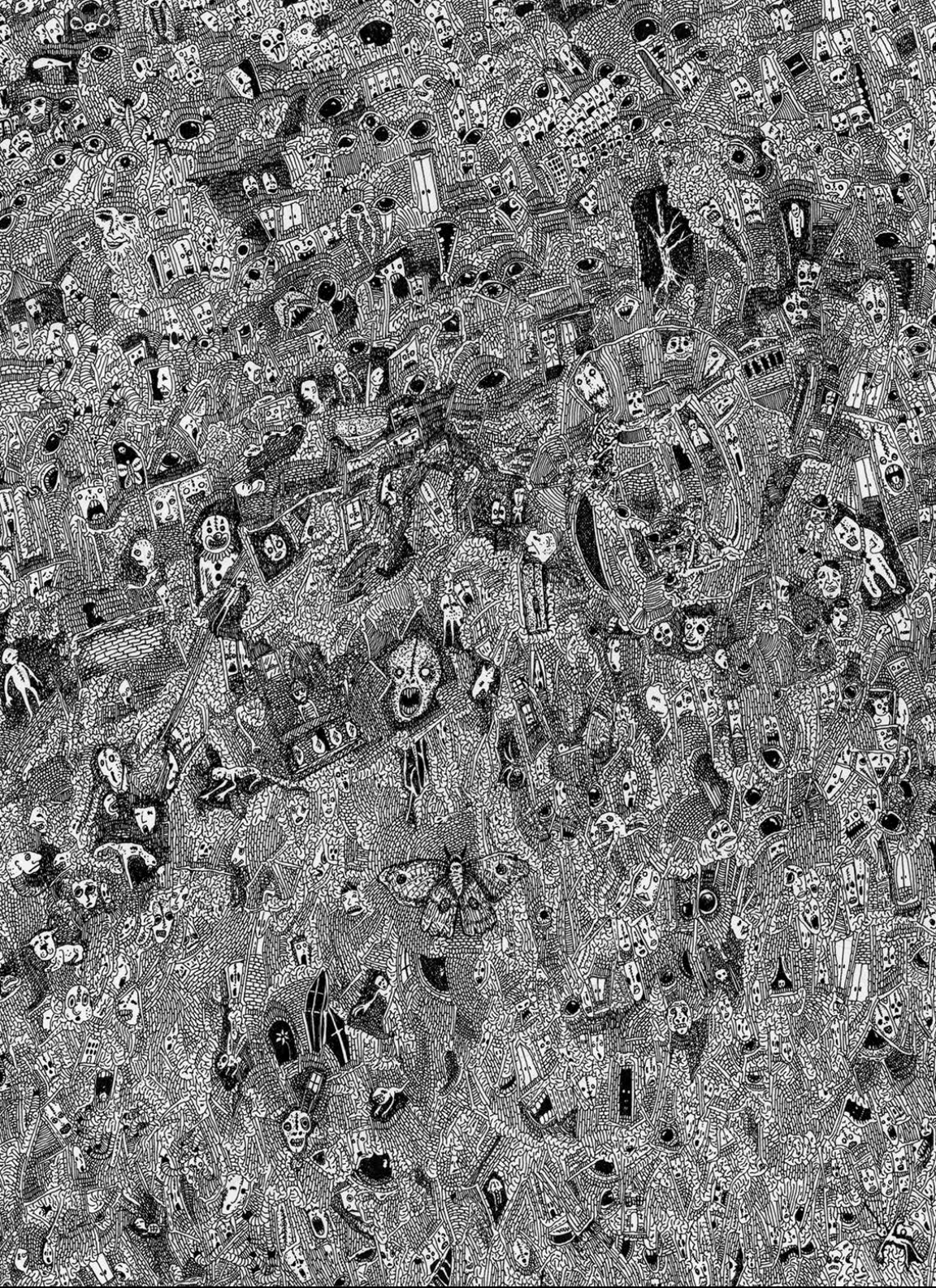
*Now I shall sing the second kingdom
there where the soul of man is
cleansed,
made worthy to ascend to Heaven.*



Pictured top: *Information Overload* **Bottom:** *The Audience*



Pictured above: *Tenants*



Pictured above: *Paranoia*



a p



LOADING...

MEMORY SIMULATION FOR A GRANDMOTHER

by [Vikram Ramakrishnan](#)

I'm nodding to the manufactured bass and synthetic percussion of TabbblaBeatz, waiting for fresh memories to render. I'm having trouble concentrating. I can't believe pr0CREE8 is gone. It feels like just yesterday he pushed me to freelance. To quit the Monopolies that ply their customers with memrubbish—shoddy, poorly designed memsims that hack devs slap together—the barest of frail, brittle memories to keep buyers wanting.

I glance up at my three monitors. They depict simple but vivid nature scenes. An ocean wave crashing onto a beach. A pink sunrise illuminating a mountain's snowy ridges. Twin shooting stars streaking across the night sky. pr0CREE8 would have been proud. I've put days into perfecting them.

My phone's pitch disrupts the music. Grabbing it, I swipe the screen, and the phone goes quiet. The ZeroKnow app banner glows green, indicating an encrypted message.

Unknown sender wants to connect.

It's a new customer. The app opens to a light-gray chatbox. Three dots dance in unison at the bottom while the sender types.

Unknown sender:

Greenm0rld?

pr0CREE8 said I should talk to you.

He was my old dealer.

Me:

Send your hash w/ his sig to prove it.

Unknown sender:

How do I do that?

I roll my eyes. How do they not know that?

Unknown sender:

Oh, nevermind, found it.

Staring at my screen, I wait for the sender to prove their identity. Going on trust alone sends devs to jail, or worse. The last thing I want is bruiser attention. Like what happened to pr0CREE8. He got himself killed, getting deep into custom memsim development—the Monopolies don't like this. Of course, they claim it's because black market memsims can damage a person's neural-interface BIOS. But the real reason is they want us to buy memories from them directly.

And since the City protects the Monopolies, and the bruisers protect the City, bruisers took out pr0CREE8. He was on the run, but in the end, they caught up with him. His last message to me was that he would send his clients my way. I feel guilty for never responding. I should have said something. *Thanks for everything. You were my mentor.* Something corny to make a guy about to die feel better about his choices in life, but I had to be careful. I couldn't run the risk of bruisers targeting me through some hack of pr0CREE8's gear.

My phone chimes.

Unknown sender:

efdd63f73cd539b6

I tap the hash code, and my screen glows a faint blue. The unknown user's nym displays, confirming their identity: *Saffr0n27*.

Me:

What's your mempref?

Saffr0n27:

I don't really care.

Anything.

Can you come soon?

Doesn't care. Needs me to come over soon. Yep. Memsim addict. But who am I to judge?

Me:

Send me your address.

An address pin appears. Tapping it reveals Saffr0n27's location. An old brownstone on the west side of the city, the nice part of town. For a moment, I'm impressed by pr0CREE8's ability to land some wealthy clients.

Me:

Half an hour to get there.

Saffr0n27:

Thank you.

Please hurry.

I shove my phone into my pocket and grab my backpack sitting at the base of my desk. There's a razor-thin, hidden slot at the bottom of my pack where I store my memsims in transit. From it, I pull out three slate-gray chips.

Each chip is as long and wide as my fingertip, and as thin as a paper sheet. These three memsims are state-of-the-art. I spent a week's worth of computational rendering time on each of them, and they are some of my best works yet, full of vibrant images, sounds, and smells that will turn any buyer into a bundle of wet eyes and sobs.

I'll save them for someone more discerning.

When I first started freelancing, I thought people would want significant, happy memories—winning the City Lottery, weddings, seeing a kid walk for the first time. The kind that the Monopolies churn out. What surprised me was that most buyers want small ones. The memory of a red bird streaking across the sky on a bright spring morning. The first memory of snow falling. The arbitrary summer afternoon coming home after playing with childhood friends.

Small memories are the hardest to storyboard and render, but on the flip side, they make memories feel real. It's what gets my buyers' emotions going. The Monopolies have nothing on me.

I set the three chips aside next to a plastic box overflowing with generic memsim chips, trivial-yet-artistic ones, each that needed an hour or two of rendering compute time. At the top of the box sits a stack of chips tied together with a red rubber band. They're a windmill series for a no-show buyer. I allocate twenty percent of my dealing to no-shows. They happen often enough that I'm used to them. But, when the windmill buyer didn't show, it annoyed me more than usual. I'm not a scrappy freelance dev who

uses cheap compute to cobble together colors and shapes. I take my time to make sure my memories are perfect.

The windmill series goes into my pack, along with a handful of others. I throw in a scrubbed laptop in case any bruisers stop me and want to see what's in my bag.

Through the small window in my apartment, I see the sun setting. The sky is a blend of blood-red and orange. I slip on my black leather jacket, zipping it up to my chin. I lace up my boots, grab my helmet, throw my backpack over my shoulder, and head out the door.

Outside my apartment building, a cat slinks along the ground, tail high in the air. It takes one look at me and bounds away into the hedges. If it was daytime, I might have taken the Underline or even walked, but it's safer for me to ride since it's evening.

The fluorescent trim around Lavender Lightning's body shimmers a faint purple, and when I lay down on the motorcycle's long leather seat, the trim glows brighter. I place my phone in the holster between the handlebars and tap its screen. When I wrap my palms around the cool handles, the bike hums, and I speed along the streets, chill wind running through me.

Lavender Lightning accelerates as it routes my coordinates into its system. I've modded my phone to avoid popular bruiser zones, so we take a long route. A satellite view map depicts the city, blue and green circles flashing on a red crisscrossed grid. My ride is one of the small blue circles, coasting north through major streets and alleyways, weaving between metallic skyscrapers and concrete apartment buildings.

I know little about pr0CREE8's ex-clients, but it only occurs to me how many of them are memsim-addicted. Saffr0n27 is the third I'm dealing with. The last two were straight addicts, trying to get high on a fresh memory to match one of their old favorites. One was a futures broker who wanted a memory of his father telling him he was proud of him. The other, a smart-contract lawyer wanting a memory of his first girlfriend telling him she loved him. None of these things happened, but they wanted to feel like they did.

That's what most people want memsims for. They want to feel, and addicts want to feel something big. Since Monopoly memsims are all drivel, people come to us for custom sims.

pr0CREE8's custom sims are expensive and need 100x more rendering compute than the simple memories I create. When cloud servers see your usage patterns pop like that, they'll send bruisers to your door.

It got them banging on his door. He was sloppy. I can't be that sloppy.

A 3-D street depiction of the west side of the city replaces the satellite view. A modulating, glowing red circle shows my destination. Lavender Lightning slows as we pass by an enormous park. Evening shadows drape couples walking hand-in-hand. I hang a left into a narrow street, and Lavender Lightning pulls over, parking itself on the corner of the block. I hop off.

The neighborhood is full of rich-people brownstones. Potted flowers run up and down their steps like in a dead artist's painting from a hundred years ago. Saffr0n27's address reveals a tall, flat-faced home. Faint colors of canary-yellow light up the windows.

I message my buyer on ZeroKnow.

Me:

I'm here.

The chatbox flashes, and a faint chime sounds.

Saffr0n27:

Who is this?

Me:

Greenm0rld.

Memsims?

Saffr0n27:

Oh yes.

Sorry.

The door's open. Come in.

The foyer's lights reveal long red, cream, and gold carpeting, an entrance to an adjacent room, and a wall full of framed pictures. One frame depicts a static scene: a man in a black tux twirling a woman dressed in a glittering red and gold sari, one of her arms stretched out, fingertips in the deep red of mehndi. Behind her, guests stand smiling mid-clap, faded into the black and white background. The picture pixelates, drifting into a forest scene. The same woman wears a red bandana around her head and hiking pants, her back to a thick redwood.

"I'm here," a woman's voice creaks.

I'm greeted by the faint sounds of sitar and harmonium in the adjacent den. The music is real, not synthetic.

An older woman is sitting in the corner of a couch. She's wearing a red and gold sari. She has tucked her legs underneath her and propped her

arm on the armrest. Golden bangles glitter around her wrists. A brown felt blanket is draped over her shoulders, and a notebook is in her lap. In front of her is a long, wooden coffee table. On the table are notebooks and a photo album. She coughs, waving a frail hand my way.

"Sorry. For a moment, I forgot you were coming," she says, tapping on the notebook. "But I have it written down here. Greenw0rld. Memsims."

Heavy memsim users have trouble creating short-term memories. It's one reason the City clamps down so hard on black market memsim use. They worry it would cause a public health crisis. I feel bad for the woman, wondering what kind of life has led her to this addiction. I push my feelings aside.

"You said you didn't have any memprefs," I say. "I brought a bunch of different types. You can try some and let me know which you'd want?"

She pulls one of her white hair braids aside and points a shaking finger to the back of her neck.

I sigh. It's bad. Addicts have trouble with hand coordination needed to install the chip at the base of their neck. Users typically come in twos, each helping the other install memsims. There's no one else here but me, though.

I pull out one of the windmill memsims from my bag and snap it into her port. She swipes a trembling finger on her phone and leans back into the couch, a smile growing on her face.

"This is so pleasant," she says, her voice lilting and rising with her accent. "I don't know how long it's been since I've had such a simple, charming memory."

She sits there, smiling for a minute before reaching back and removing the chip.

"Thank you," she says.

"Yeah, sure," I say. "I'll invoice you for it on ZeroKnow."

She nods.

"So, how many do you want?" I say. "I have a bunch."

"I'm looking for something stronger."

I've been through this conversation before. Addicts like this always want something stronger. Stronger is slang for custom sims. "I can get in real trouble like that. I don't deal in stronger."

"pr0CREE8 did."

"*Did*," I say. "Now he's dead."

"He said you would do this favor for me," she says.

I want to say, *Look, lady. I've got lots of nice sims. I just don't do that kind of custom. I might do them for myself, but that's different.* But I can't bring myself to say it. Looking at her—a diminutive woman crumpled up into the couch's corner like a discarded toy—and listening to her trembling voice makes me sit down.

“What favor?” I say instead.

She sighs and smooths the sari cloth over her thighs.

“You know,” she says. “I’m supposed to be wearing white, but I can’t get myself to do it.”

“Why’s that?”

“My husband passed yesterday.”

I don’t know what to say. I blurt out the first thing that comes to mind. “How did it happen?”

“He was old. We both knew it was coming,” the woman says. “His body, his mind, it all broke down. It was only a matter of time.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It happens to all of us. Age. It feels like just yesterday we got married. But even that memory has faded. I have to write down little things to remember that night. It’s why I can’t...why I *won’t* wear white. I want to remember that day. That I was wearing this.” She runs her fingers over her sari’s pleats. “Wearing it now gives me a piece of that memory back.”

I wish I could help her.

“Once we knew our memories were fading, my husband and I wrote down all the little things about our lives that made our time together special,” she says, opening up her notebook. “Like our wedding reception. I have them written down here. How my mother smelled of jasmine and sweat when she hugged me after the first dance—after disapproving our union for so long. My grandfather joining us on the dance floor, everyone laughing as he balanced a glass of his favorite single-malt on his head. The way my husband’s palm felt against the small of my back when he introduced me to his business school professors.”

Her brown eyes turn liquid. She closes her notebook and lets out a deep sigh.

“With details like those,” she says, “your friend made us custom memories.”

“I can get in trouble if I make custom sims,” I say.

“But you could do it, couldn’t you?” she asks, her eyes now pleading. “Your friend said you were better than him.”

Did he really say that about me?

“It’s not that it’s hard to do,” I say. “It’s dangerous. Contraband. Every time I render the kind of memories you want, I risk being reported for unusual usage.”

“So, you *have* done it before.”

I should have chosen my words more wisely. I can’t lie to this woman.

“Only for myself,” I say. “I want to help. Really, I do. But I can get in trouble.”

“This memory you just gave me,” she says, trying to change tactics. “I like it. It’s simple. It’s pleasant.”

“That’s a straightforward memsim,” I say. “Those can get made on chips easy to get. Run of the mill. Some storyboarding on my part, a couple of hours rendering.”

“Is it so easy for you to make memories?” she says, laughing. “These days, I close my eyes and try to picture his face. I can’t remember if he had a mustache or not. Then I remember one of our children asked him to shave it off. But I ask myself, ‘or was that someone else’s child who asked their father?’ The photo album is the only way I know for certain it was our child, not someone else’s.”

She’s not an addict. She’s just an old woman who’s slowly losing it.

“Hey, look, I’m sorry about this, but I just run a simple business,” I say. I am surprised at the force of my words. “I can get you minor memsims. I promise you that I put a lot of effort into them. Do you like forests? I saw a picture of redwoods on the wall there. I got a bunch of forest ones. Hiking. Jumping off a cliff into an ocean. I’ll throw in those windmill ones too, on me. That’s it. You want anything else?”

“Please,” she says, her eyes pleading with me, wet and flowing.

“Look, I don’t—”

“It’s just a small request. A memory of him so that once it’s all gone from here,” she says, gesturing at her head, “I’ll have something to remember him by. Please. I’ll pay you anything.”

She looks at me expectantly. The thing is, I *can* do it. But why? No amount of money would make me want bruisers barreling through my door and arresting me. Killing me.

She laughs, her form shaking.

“What?”

“You look like you’re going to explode. Like I’m a bruiser about to arrest you,” she says. “Relax. Don’t worry.”

Her laugh lights up her face, taking decades off it.

As I’m getting up, she suddenly grabs my wrist. Her nails are sharp, cutting through my skin. “Memories are all we have of those we care about when they’re gone,” she says.

I try pulling myself away, but she holds on tight. When she sees I won’t change my mind, she squeezes my wrist one more time and then lets go. The energy goes out from her, and she sags into the couch.

I need to get out of here. “Can you pay my invoice?” I ask.

“Oh, sorry,” she says, giving me a heartbreaking smile.

She swipes her phone, and ZeroKnow’s synthetic ring chimes. I can leave right now, but I need to explain this to her. Or am I explaining it to myself?

“Look,” I say, my voice softer, quieter now. “If I do this, and the bruisers found out, I’d be cooked. Done.”

“I know,” she says, shaking her head. “I’m sorry, it’s very selfish of me to ask. You have your entire life in front of you. My life has already passed.”

My chest is throbbing. What’s wrong with me?

I dump the remaining chips on the table, say I’m sorry, and I’m out the door. If she said anything as I left, I don’t know. I don’t care.

I’m back on Lavender Lightning. I slam my phone in its holster, and the bike starts humming. I need to cool off, to calm down, so I decide to ride manual. I don’t care where I’m going. I’m zooming down the roads, cool air rushing around me in a fury. I can hear my heart beating as blood rushes up and down my neck and ears.

That’s when my phone flashes red, and sirens blare in loud and high undulating crashes.

Bruisers.

Dammit. I got sloppy. I should have used my phone’s map instead of riding around aimlessly. I take a deep breath and slow down. Lavender Lightning comes to a full stop, and I sit up, looking around.

There it is across the street, lamplight glinting off its metallic, hulking form. It saunters over, crushing twigs and glass under its heavy legs. The bruiser’s body armor—blue bracketed protective covering—comes into view. Its four arms rest at its side, and in two of its hands, it holds batons.

Atop its hulking form is a sphere. It looks like my black helmet, except it has a red visor across the center. The visor sprays red-light over Lavender Lightning, scanning it for contraband. It turns its attention to me. The light goes into my eyes, and I have to blink and look away.

“Declare your purpose,” the bruiser commands, its manufactured voice artificial and dissonant.

“Going for a joy ride,” I say.

“Phone,” the bruiser says.

I have to hand it over. A small cable extends from one of its finger-like appendages. It inserts it into my phone’s port. For a moment, I’m thankful that I encrypt all my communications, but that moment’s fleeting.

“You are far from your designated living space,” it says. “Declare your reason.”

“Because it’s the only nice part of town,” I say. Saffron27 comes to mind. I have to force myself to push thoughts of her away. “I can’t go for a joyride in my neighborhood.”

The bruiser drops my phone on the ground. I want to clench my teeth, but I have to remain cool.

“Declare your bag’s contents.”

“A laptop,” I say, slipping it off my shoulder, opening it for the bruiser.

The light emanating from its visor turns from red to white and sprays over the bag. The bruiser turns my bag upside down, and my laptop falls out.

I want to yell. I want to shove that monstrosity of a bruiser to the ground. But I can’t retaliate.

The bruiser shakes the bag again. My anger and fear transform into a sincere thankfulness that I dumped all my memsims earlier. The bruiser drops the bag.

“You will go home,” it declares and then leaves.

Once it’s out of view, I know I’m in the clear.

I grab my gear off the ground and check my phone and laptop. Luckily, they both still work.

I’m about to choose “home” for Lavender Lightning’s next destination, but I stop short. I want to scream. Bruisers think they can harass people with impunity? The City thinks it knows what’s best for us? Monopolies think they can shove generic memories into our minds? They killed pr0CREE8 for trying to help people like Saffr0n27.

I feel like my jaw is going to burst from the way my teeth are grinding together like I’m crushing rocks with my molars. I pull up ZeroKnow and tap Saffr0n27’s address pin. My mind is running through rendering specs. I’m thinking about the chip model I’ll need for this. I wonder if I can spread out my rendering compute time, so my usage patterns aren’t obvious. One problem at a time. Get the chip. Write the story. Render the graphics. I want to get audio in there, too.

When I get back to her door, I message her on ZeroKnow.

Me:

Hey I’m back.

Can you let me in?

A few minutes pass, and the front door opens. Saffr0n27 leans against the doorway.

“Tell me about him,” I say.

“Who?” she asks.

“Your husband.”

Her eyes are now smooth and bright and imbued with hope. I will treasure this look for a lifetime.

The woman’s back straightens, and she smiles. She tells me about the first time they met. She doesn’t need her notebook for this. The sun shined

down from the bright blue sky on that spring day as she waited in the park for him. Two peacocks strolled nearby, their variegated feathers catching the sunlight.

While she tells me this, she guides me inside, and her voice is lifting and lilting, just like my heart.





CALLIS PRAEDICTIONEM

by [Renan Bernardo](#)

The patient's head bends sideways, pulled down by the fungus growing around it.

Dr. José Hutchinson tucks down his med-suit's mask and hits "record" on his wristlet.

"Fifth decade, May 23, 5:12 Vesta time. A mild case of *Callis praedictionem*. It grows out of the patient's left ear and cups the left side of his face. Stalks are carved deep in the right and back sides of the patient's neck. Most likely prescient already. Purplish gray, ciliary cap. Smell is pungent but bearable."

The patient's wife weeps and shivers, her hands on the young man's arm.

José moves to the corner of the room and whispers so she can't hear the prognosis. "Not much time left."

He hits "stop" and then checks the lodging's log. Ferg Xavier, 24-years-old, Vesta native, hydroponics programmer, recently married.

José nears and squints at Ferg. He's unconscious, laying on a tattered cushion, eyes distant and staring upward. His glasses lay over his mouth, cracked and fogged by his breath.

His wife's attention finally turns to José.

"Dr. Hutchinson, please take it off him..."

Ferg's head pulses. The fungus bobs it sideways. Inner growing stalks, pressing and tearing through muscle and bone. His wife covers her mouth.

“Please, doc!”

“It’s better if you keep some distance.” José indicates the door. Not that the Forefungus would infect her. One in about 100,000 spores is infectious, and the ship’s filters manage to decrease the infection rate. But he needs her to leave. He’s about to kill her husband. Not a welcoming thought when he only had a cup of coffee. He presses his tongue against his upper teeth.

“My hubby, doc.” The wife brings her hands together, pleading, begging for the kind of miracle physicians can’t bestow. She frowns at the bottle in Ferg’s hand. “We were talking—It was so...so fast, it just inflated out of his face like a...balloon.”

Ferg’s neck curves slightly outward. His head shudders. Not much time. José has to act.

“I will need you outside now.” José tries to push Ferg’s wife to the door with a forceful hand on her shoulder. “I’ll try to remove the fungus and patch him up.” Lying often helps.

“What are the odds, doc?” The woman bites her lips. “I’ve heard about this fungus, and...not good things.”

“Not good things, indeed. But there’s a chance.” There’s not. Not when the physician is José Hutchinson. His current methods do not include that part. Tongue against teeth. “Now, please, the sooner you leave, the higher his chances.”

The door slides open, and she leaves. Curious faces already pack the corridors, trying to peek inside. He gestures in front of the panel to lock the door.

José turns back to the patient and picks up the medical bag from the floor. He types his pin, opens it, and produces his scalpel.

“Now, tell me the future, Mr. Xavier.” He hits “record” on his wristlet, yanks Ferg’s glasses from his face and slits the fungus, starting with the visible part upon Ferg’s left cheek. “Sorry for that.”

When the patients are left to die on their own, no one can hear them ramble about the future. For this reason, their death has to be provoked. It’s more merciful this way, and the chances of success increase.

José twists his nose. The odor of carrion whiffs out from the incision. His mask-protected eyes tear up. His suit whirs to filter it out. *Damn*. Even Ferg’s wayward eyes tear up. The cut oozes a quasi-transparent bluish fluid. Partly the fungus’s own secretion, partly Ferg’s blood.

Ferg whimpers. His chest heaves from a sudden rush of adrenaline caused by his body battling the growing stalks. The last stages of infection. José hits the timer on his wristlet.

“Mr. Xavier, I’m Dr. Hutchinson, and I’m here to save you.” Lying helps. “Tell me something about the future. Loren Hutchinson—have you heard of her? Do you know anything about the cure for this fungus?” It’s a stretch to mention anything. At this stage, Ferg’s not listening, but José always hopes something will surface from the infected’s subconscious.

Saliva trickles out of Ferg’s mouth and runs down his chin to the fungus’s cap. Twenty seconds. They never last more than a minute.

Ferg gurgles, black froth running out of his mouth and foaming on his nose and chest.

José sighs.

Ferg widens his eyes.

“Stalks rip Adriana’s bones.”

Ferg’s eyes whirl inside their orbits. He emits a low, high-pitched moan. His neck snaps as the fungus stitches itself up, yielding stalks through the man’s body, trying to reconquer its new environment. Its tips jut out of his neck, not unlike a severe case of rash.

“Adriana...” José whispers. The name doesn’t ring a bell. At least the slur is comprehensible and straightforward. A future Forefungus’s victim.

José raises his wristlet to his mouth. “Ferg Xavier. Time of death: Fifth decade, 5:24, May 23. Cause of death...” *José Hutchinson*, he thinks. He has been euthanizing Forefungus victims for a while now, without even considering putting them into the cryo-coma containment pods. But would it be worth it? Loren’s inside one, struggling with a fungus around her face, just waiting, either to die or to face a future with consequences.

“*Callis praedictionem*,” he stammers, almost forgetting the recorder.

He packs his things and walks out, delicately pushing Ferg’s wife back toward the throng that has crowded there, and locking the door behind him.

“I’m afraid it wasn’t possible to save your husband.”

Rehearsed bad news.

Ferg’s wife falls to her knees, trying to peek at her dead husband. José gestures in front of the panel to slide it shut and save her the trouble. He dodges the kneeling wife but stops right before taking a turn at the next corridor.

“I’m sorry.”

Never tactful. He never learned the woman’s name, and he also kept his mask on so that the version of him who gave her the bad news was just an impersonal glazed mirror to her. Families. The worst part of his job. He needs to deal with them as quick as possible, otherwise they might have enough time to wonder what he does, how he works. His impeccable methods.

He turns right and strides down the corridor toward the Med Center. People whisper inside closed doors. He's eager to leave the residential complex before those indistinct conversations turn into the curious hum of those who discover death is around.

The antiseptic of the Med Center flows right into his nose as the doors slide open. An anesthetic comfort after carrion.

MedBots skitter all around. Mechanical spiders with flattened backs carrying medicines, PPEs, vials...It gets nauseating after a whole minute glancing at them. Loren once mapped their paths, drawing graphs showing their most probable destinations based on which equipment they carry. The MedBot team wanted her working with them. Now they will have to wait.

Dr. Gunther comes from her room, casting a worried look from over her wristlet.

"How is she?" José asks, before his counterpart can say anything.

"Stable. We've performed another cryoparalytic surgery in order to halt the stalks from reaching further parts of her body."

José nods and stares into Dr. Gunther's eyes. She lowers her head back to her wristlet. The stalks are near her spinal cord. That's what those eyes tell.

He walks down the main hallway to Containment Pod #1255. His lips twitch whenever he thinks of it. His girl quarantined, a number on a door. The same girl who ran across the hydroponics garden to catch bee-drones and increase her personal collection. Freedom is only appreciated with hindsight.

He gestures to the door, and it opens. Dr. Gunther enters after him.

The glass surrounding the pod shows Loren's vitals, which in this state means only her body temperature: -245°C . A severe case of Forefungus grows out of Loren's ears, completely hiding her shoulders and breasts, all the way down to her belly. It's like a faceless valley filled with hills and mounds, as if the grass was cilium and the color purple.

José taps on the glass and darkens its opacity, skipping the red warnings about Loren's condition. He's been through it. When she comes back, she won't speak, won't see. But she'll still be able to walk, move her arms and fingers, and recognize her peers by voice. Her family. Her brain will make all correct associations if all goes well. That's enough to bring her back, enough to believe in slurs.

"Rosa came," Dr. Gunther says, arms crossed. She gives an inquisitive glare.

José's heart races when he hears his wife's name out loud.

"And?" He zooms in on an augmented model of Loren's upper torso, manipulating the image with his fingers as a means to analyze the microscopic details. Thin stalks already curl around her ribs, but they can be excised with a

couple of ultra-precise surgeries. What matters is that her bones are intact, her spinal cord is untouched—even if barely—and no crucial veins or arteries have been crushed to give way to the stalks. The stalks themselves are retarded by the cryo-coma, but they advance, nevertheless.

Dr. Gunther sighs, arms relaxing. “She told us to terminate Loren. She’s been in this state for 4 years, Dr. Hutchinson. Perhaps...”

“Heather.” He raises a finger, speaking not with the doctor under his tutorship, but with the friend who played chess with him in the Pasta Fiore at lunchtime. It’s been at least a year since they last moved a single chess piece. “Rosa knows nothing about Loren’s true condition, she doesn’t believe a word of what I say, so...Please, trust me. I’ll bring my daughter back.”

“Did you think of a treatment, then?”

“I’m on my way.” Lying helps. Praying that the infected will blurt out something useful is his scientific method. Relying on the pseudo-science of prescience isn’t even ethical, but it’s what he has. Doesn’t matter how much money and time he puts into researching the Forefungus, it will take years—and Loren’s life—to find a cure. Even the gigantic healing complex of Arestas Station had postponed any research about the Forefungus. It’s an extremely localized issue, they said. Couldn’t spare the resources.

“Keep up your good work, Heather.” José leaves. This place is not for him—or Loren. She should be in the hydroponics garden or in a classroom learning about the MedBots’ optimized paths. Not inside that thing. “Take care of my girl.”

He turns back to Heather. “Do you know anyone called Adriana?”

She mulls over the name for a bit, then shakes her head. “Why?”

“Check with Command, please. See if they can find this name.”

He stares at the blackened oval glass one more time and leaves the containment room.



Rosa is late for the first time since he’s known her.

The meeting has already played out in José’s head. Rosa will hand him the divorce docs and force him to euthanize Loren. It’ll be the end of their bond for good. No marriage, no daughter, no attachments. Erasure of time.

He types on his wristlet for Adriana’s name, trying to shift his focus from the coming meeting. At least it’s clear what will happen with Adriana. It’s just a matter of finding the woman and...waiting for her slurs.

Perhaps this time, Adriana will help him find a solution to the fungus, or at least to Loren's case. It's hard to put what the infected say in perspective, to draw meaning from the indistinguishable babble amid the obvious sentences. But he can't deny the bone-parting fungus helps the Vesta. He's been able to predict accidents, save lives, and discover incidents before they happen.

The Vesta databases return an empty result. No one named Adriana among the 200,000 people aboard, not even counting those dead since the Vesta left Earth fifty-six years before. He frowns. As Chief Physician, he has access to basic info about everyone. Is she a stowaway? Is it a nickname?

Rosa arrives. He presses his tongue against his teeth so hard it cuts. He cringes. Rosa's hair is the same as when he proposed, clouding over her head in tufts of black and a bit of gray.

They nod at each other, he with a sneer on his lip. Rosa sits in front of him and straightens her skirt.

"So..." José leans forward on the table. "This meeting is for—"

"You know why I'm here." She leans forward, too, defiant. They haven't been this close since Loren's diagnosis. "Our daughter."

Rosa doesn't even have the courage to speak Loren's name anymore. She blames him, of course. The acclaimed doctor of the Vesta failing with his own daughter. Who else is there to blame? Apart from the air, the only other cause of Forefungus are fathers who are doctors and still incapable of applying simple guidelines of security regarding potential alien threats.

"What about her?"

"Release her from cryo." Rosa's lips quiver. The words 'kill her' were there seconds ago. "Let her go. She doesn't deserve this."

"She's not feeling anything, not thinking. The cryo—"

"I don't care." She shakes her head. "Our daughter's place is in space now, her ashes released off an airlock."

"I can save her." He almost begs.

"The same way you could keep her safe from your filthy work?"

He sighs. Bringing research into their lodgings. His life's greatest mistake. A specimen of *Callis praedictionem* and a curious teenager. Of course, he tried to convince himself he couldn't have known the fungus was a deadly threat, but that was a lie. What kind of doctor would let an unprotected alien fungus in the same environment where his daughter watches TV and calls her boyfriend? José Hutchinson's kind.

“They tell the future.” José presses his tongue against his teeth. He hasn’t told that to anyone, not even Dr. Gunther.

Rosa scowls at him. Her head bobs slightly in disbelief.

“Who tells *what*?”

“The...patients. The victims of the Forefungus. That’s why I gave it this name. Forefungus. From ‘foresight.’ *Callis praedictionem*.”

“Fuck the names. I know *my* daughter is dead, and I want her to be at peace.”

Rosa produces a tablet from her purse. The divorce papers.

He raises a hand to stop her. He just needs a bit more time to explain himself.

“When the victims die, they speak.” He blabs it out. Quick. Before she can interrupt him. “They predict the future. Do you remember the problem in Paquetá Reactor six months ago? I prevented it. One of the fungus patients told me it would...What did he say, again? *Paquetá will melt*. So, I convinced the Chief Engineer to perform an inspection. We’d all be dead, Rosa.”

“Are you trying to make me believe in this shit?” She lets loose a boisterous laugh, her chest heaving. People glare at them. “You of all people, acting like a clairvoyant.”

“Not me. The patients.”

She brushes her skirt while regaining her composure. “Even if that’s the truth, can you save *them*?”

“Not yet.” He smiles sourly. “But they can tell me how to find a cure. It’s a matter of patience. We can...” The words flutter on his lips. It’s hard to say it out loud. “We can save Loren.”

Rosa slides the tablet across the table, her eyes visibly wet.

“The divorce papers and a commitment to shut down the systems maintaining our daughter. If you don’t sign both of them, you’re bound to lose your job.”

He pulls the tablet closer.

“You don’t even say her name anymore,” he says. “You’re killing her.”

“You have one week,” she says, her teeth clenching in what might’ve been anger.

“It’s not enough.” He grapples with the table’s edge, his tongue pushing his teeth, damn the pain. “Please, Rosa. One week is not enough for a decent number of cases. I need—”

Rosa stands and leaves.

Families. The worst part of his job.

His wristlet beeps. It’s an audio from Dr. Gunther. He hits “play.”

“Dr. Hutchinson, we’ve got an emergency in the hangar bay.”



Ilana Eze is stuck between the seat and the cockpit of one of the Vesta's small freighters. José's hands tremble as he runs his fingers over where the fungus presses against the throttle sticks and the info display. It has pushed Ilana back against her seat and kept her tied in the belts. She can't move. Part of the fungus's cap squeezes her right cheek, slightly crooking her head up and left.

"So, you're a freighter pilot..." José puts some pressure on the fungus with his fingers. Ilana grimaces. Mild pain. Too much would indicate an advanced state in which the stalks reach her spinal cord and probably strain her arteries.

"Yep," she says with clenched teeth. "It gets boring, though, coming and going from so many stations and ships."

"My daughter likes to draw the Vesta's ships. She drew a freighter like this once." Her most detailed drawing, weeks before his lapse. "She wanted to travel in a small freighter."

"Wanted?"

"Wants. Don't move your head." His voice is harsh. He moves her chin with a finger. "We want to prevent the fungus from bursting."

"I understand." He tries to swivel her seat, but it's stuck. It seems there's an enormous purple bag swelling out of her.

"Are you aware of the Forefungus?" He glances over the info display in the cockpit just to be sure the fungus's pressure won't activate something that would hurl the freighter out of the hanger and into space.

"I know it's bad," she says. "But you're the chief. You're a damn good doc. You tell me how bad."

José laughs. If he was good, Loren wouldn't be frozen with that same cap over her face. Or perhaps his mistake has nothing to do with the job of a physician, but that of a father.

"Fifth decade, 13:19, May 23, Vesta time. A severe case of *Callis praedictionem*. It runs down from Ilana Eze's right ear and fills the freighter's cockpit. Seat needs to be removed. Scent is mild. Prognosis inconclusive."

"Inconclusive, my ass." Ilana chortles. "You can tell your pretty bracelet I'm gonna die."

Not if he induces her into a cryo-coma. She'll endure sequelae, but not necessarily death. Outside, two ships lift off, their backs lighting the hangar with their green exhaust. He squints. A clang reverberates through the ship when they launch. The fungus's surface ripples, excited by the vibration. He has to work fast if he's going to do something.

“Have you heard about someone called Adriana?” he says, kneeling and unlocking his medical bag. “Perhaps it’s a pilot nickname.”

“We wouldn’t–” She moans in pain. Growing stalks. She’ll lose consciousness any time now. “We wouldn’t use Adriana. Froghead, Ironnails, Lame Lips. Adriana is too pretty.” Her dimples frame a grin that rapidly reverts to a smirk of pain.

“I’m going to call for help,” he says. He has never euthanized a conscious patient, doesn’t matter how bad their vitals. He won’t cross that line. “We’ll remove the seat and bring you over to the Med Center in order to treat you.”

“Okay, doc.” Ilana’s breath becomes ragged. Her arms fall over the sides of the seat. Weakening. José has to work faster, but the part of his brain that wants to listen to her slurs is stalling him. He should’ve dropped the log recording, the chitchat. He knew her seat needed to be removed from the moment he entered the damned ship.

He tells his wristlet to send an urgent audio to the hangar bay office.

“Bring me a small freighter technician, ASAP.”

“Doctor...”

Ilana wails, her legs spasm. The info display bursts. Its screen cracks and pierces through the fungus.

José steps back.

Carrión and melted wires. His mask filters out what is possible.

Ilana screams. Her legs pulse, her boots knock rapidly on the floor.

He turns on his wristlet’s recorder.

She opens her eyes, eyelids flapping. Not enough. She’ll faint before saying anything. Spume gurgles out of her throat, bathing the purple fungus’s cap in pitch black.

“Say something...” He pulls down his mask and approaches her mouth, inches from the frothing drool. “Loren Hutchinson. Forefungus treatment.”

“Adriana says the cure,” Ilana grumbles, spitting on his cheek.

He pivots to face her and grapples with the seat’s back. “Who is Adriana? Tell me!”

The snap is loud. It seems even louder than the launching ships in the hangar. A thin stalk crawls out of her neck, blood-red, slow, almost shy.

Something chokes him, but he manages to say, “Ilana Eze. Time of death: Fifth decade, 13:33, May 23. Cause of death...unethical procedures.”



Outside the round window of his room, stars gleam unimpressive.

José could've wrenched out the damned seat. Freighters have tools, and he's not ignorant of how to use them. He could've brought Ilana to a containment pod instead of prattling on about freighters and performing useless examinations on her.

He stares at his terminal. It's still on, even though he hasn't used it for months. Texts of his research on the Forefungus are still open on it, dormant, a lampshade casting a pale, dismal light on the dark room.

His tongue still hurts, and now his head is joining the club. He turns off the terminal and sinks in darkness, massaging his forehead.

He abandoned his research when clairvoyance started to provide better results. Loren was one of the first infected, and back then, he didn't know about the prophetic slurs. He was devastated, and as if his incompetence wasn't enough, Rosa asked him to leave and to stay away from her. They'd been fighting a lot. Loren's incident was only the culprit. He did as she said and drowned himself in research, crushing his hopes each time it took him toward a new dead end. The Forefungus was alien, and probably penetrated the Vesta via an exploration crew, but the Med Center didn't have enough resources to study it. Even when new cases sprouted, it was never enough. He could give blood and life to understand the fungus, but never find a cure—not in a feasible time to save Loren. Cryo-coma was useful, but only for a limited time. One day, she would just...

His hope resurfaced, even if mildly, when he deduced the patient's slurs were not only random mumblings, but predictions of the future. He developed theories about the prescience. Fungi with quantum properties traversing the space; spores that came out through one of the Einstein-Rosen bridges being tested in space stations; fungi that spanned multiple dimensions. But he quickly set proper science aside and started to rely solely on the madness of the infected. Pure pragmatism. It allowed him to prevent accidents, to save some people, and mainly to redeem himself for allowing a teenager to share a dorm with an alien threat...

His wristlet beeps. Dr. Gunther's audio.

"Doctor, I have an answer to your request. There's no one named Adriana in the commander's databank or in the deceased's registry."

He sighs and stands, grabbing Rosa's tablet and pressing his thumb over the divorce icon. Done. If Rosa sees he's willing to do as she says, perhaps she'll allow him to let Loren live for a few more weeks. Just

enough to find out if there is someone named Adriana who can provide a cure for the Forefungus.

The tablet's icon flashes green. Rosa has seen his response and acknowledged it. For the Vesta, they're officially divorced.

He selects Dr. Gunther's contact on his wristlet.

"Dr. Hutchinson?"

"Heather, I'm stepping down. Just need a few more weeks to finish some...things." He rubs his knuckles on his brows as he wonders where in the ship retired people spend their time. Where do unethical retired physicians gather for a game of chess? "I think it's advisable if you assume my position. I can write a recommendation letter."

"Doctor, but...Perhaps you're strained. Take a month off."

"No. I'm not the best person for this job." He's probably the worst. "Please, just..."

"Can I ask you why?"

"When I was a child, I set up my mother's seat on her Taxiship." He rubs his tongue on his teeth, but now it feels numb. "Configured the ejection drive, screwed the seat down on the floor, adjusted its backrest, armrests, pistons. Damn, I polished it. It gleamed when Mom sat in it for the first time."

"What does this—"

"Nothing, Heather. When this is all over, I want to play some chess."

"When what's over, Dr. Hutchinson?"

He hangs up.



Rosa is already in Containment Pod #1255 when he arrives. It's her first time there, and she keeps a distance from the dimmed surface, her hands clutching her elbows. Heather has occluded Loren's bodily temperature and any information that might upset Rosa. Only her name gleams in a drab orange over the black. Loren Agnes Hutchinson.

"Rosa." Her shoulders slump when she sees it's him. He hands her the tablet. "Here it is. Sorry for my stubbornness."

"One year inside this...egg?" Rosa's lips curl when she dares to look at the blackened pod. Underneath the semi-transparent medical cap, her hair is now tied with a black scarf, the same she used for her mother's funeral. "How can you endure it? She was our daughter, José. We fucking laughed when she first crawled in Oxygen Park. We taught her how to draw and how to research about MedBots. And still, you watch

your damned daughter everyday frozen inside an egg with a monster gnawing on her face. What kind of person have you become?"

"The kind that doesn't wrench out spaceship's seats. But I did...I'm *doing* everything I can so that we can all smile again."

"It's not about us." She points a finger at him, grunting between her teeth. "It's about our daughter."

"About Loren." He pats a finger on the orange letters. "If you want to speak about her, at least say her name. Her name is Loren."

"That's not the name I would've given her." Rosa shakes her head. "She's Loren because you liked the name so much, but I could barely have an opinion. I would've named her Adriana."

José gulps, pushing his tongue against his teeth.

They've been warning him. It's like the Forefungus wants him to know about his daughter's fate.

"What's bothering you?"

"You may want to leave."

"Why?"

"It's time to..." He can't complete his sentence. He doesn't need to.

Rosa doesn't leave, but instead steps back and moves to a shadowy corner, just out of the white halo of light that falls on the pod and its surroundings. Heather brings him his medsuit. He puts it on, clumsily, stitching it up and tucking in his mask, the only thoughts in his head those about Adriana and the warning slurs of the dying. Heather adjusts the pod's opacity and initiates Loren's cryo-wake. The glass shows the temperature raising from -245 °C. José picks up his scalpel and forces his hands to stop shaking.

Now he remembers. When they first took Loren to see the stars in the Viewdeck, Rosa told her the universe is comprised of millions of those twinkling unnamed gas giants. She told Loren to pick one out and name it, and Loren chose a faint blue one, not the brightest, but the one more distant from the others. A lonely grain upon a black shore. She named it Adriana. When Rosa asked why she picked that name, Loren told her she'd seen it on a slip of paper in her mother's desk drawer.

"The temperature is -40 °C, doctor," Heather says. "Your suit's insulation is loaded."

He enters the pod for the first time since he put Loren there, sagging against his arms, three kilograms heavier than usual, with a purple cap dangling from her ear.

For the last time, euthanasia. Exact, almost painless. He must ensure the slice is the narrowest he can perform, the death the quickest,

the slur—Loren’s final words—the clearest. A physician’s duty is not necessarily to restore one’s health, but to make sure that no one is forced to endure a life without it.

The fissure is slim, no more than the width of a hair. His gloved hand feels the slight vibration of the tearing fungus’s cap. The smell fills the pod, but his eyes are already wet this time, his nose accustomed. Loren’s feet rattle against the flat surface. She wails.

“The stalks are reaching her spinal cord,” Heather says in his ears with a hoarse, jittery voice.

The pod beeps. Loren’s vitals are back and reaching critical level. Heart rate and blood pressure are high, breathing rate fickle.

“Dad?” A squelched voice comes from somewhere inside the sea of purple and cilia. “It’s dark here and...cold. Mom?”

No. Not now. He wants to say everything is going to turn out just fine and that Mom and Dad are there to take care of her. But the time for comforting lies is over.

A shriek catches in Loren’s throat. She emits a pierced shrill, but the sound is dulled by the fungus around her face. The sound converts to a voice not her own.

“A vaccine...in Arestas’s Healing Complex.”

A constant beep from the pod. Lines flatten and numbers plunge. All comes down to her body temperature again.

He lowers his head and goes out the pod, shivering uncontrollably.

“Thank you.” Rosa whispers, and leaves the room.

Heather stops in front of him, wearing a medsuit herself. She slides a finger on the pod’s glass so that it darkens and starts to muffle the sounds of growing stalks and rupturing muscle.

“Arestas is 3,270 AU from here,” Heather says. “Command traced a route.”

He nods and hits “record” on his wristlet.

“Adriana Agnes Hutchinson. Time of death: Fifth decade, 15:53, May 27. Cause of death: *Callis Praedictionem*.”





AUTHOR INTERVIEW

CHUCK WENDIG

Feature by [Janelle Janson](#)

Have you ever read a book and immediately knew the author was something special? Well, that was my experience the first time I read a Chuck Wendig novel. He has a tremendous talent for creating memorable characters, atmospheric settings, and unique stories. He crosses genres between science fiction, fantasy, horror, and thriller, and I am here for all of it. Please enjoy my fangirl interview with the man himself.

Janelle Janson: Hello, Chuck Wendig! Thank you so much for agreeing to this interview. I am a huge fan of your work. Think Annie Wilkes, but without the crazy, maniacal tendencies. I have so many questions for you, but I'll try to keep it from getting out of control.

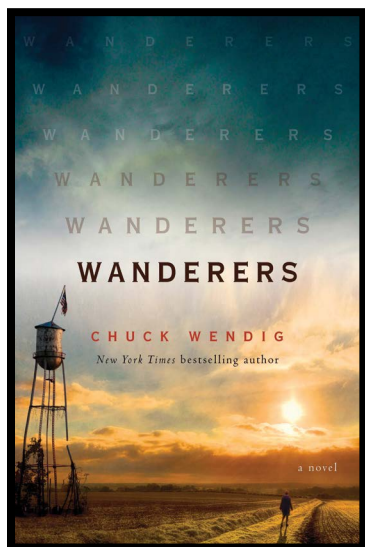
You have an extensive blog, [terribleminds.com](#), with loads of information and writing tips. When did you start your blog, and how difficult is it to maintain?

Chuck Wendig: Would you believe I started it in October of 2000? So, in October 2021, it will be old enough to have an adult beverage. It is thankfully easy to maintain, though once it starts to get regularly drunk, it might become unruly.

JJ: I've read that you started out writing science fiction and fantasy books, and also role-playing games—how was that experience? Did you enjoy collaborating with other writers?

CW: I did write RPGs very early on, yes. It was good! A little chaotic. Some editors were better and kinder than others. Collaborating with other writers was nearly always a blast, and the whole experience helped me get used to deadlines and see writing as work—real work, useful work.

JJ: My introduction to your writing was *Wanderers*. Right after I read that massive book, I knew I was in this reader/writer relationship for the long haul. For people who haven't read it yet, can you please describe what *Wanderers* is all about?



CW: *Wanderers* is a beast! About 800 pages and 280,000 words, though that's not what you asked, I suppose. In it, a number of people begin sleepwalking one after the next, forming a flock of sleepwalkers walking across the country, for unknown purpose, to unknown destination. Meanwhile, a pandemic rises alongside it. American society reacts...poorly to both these things, and chaos ensues.

JJ: *Wanderers* is one of my favorite apocalyptic stories, along with Stephen King's *The Stand* and Robert McCammon's *Swan Song*. The story includes heavy themes,

crosses genres, and is current with the world today. Did you intentionally set out to write a more relevant apocalyptic story? Did you purposely mash-up genres, such as science fiction, horror, and thriller?

CW: There's definitely purpose to putting all those pieces in play. I definitely wanted to write something modern, but also wanted to avoid it being supernatural.

JJ: When someone finishes a book like *Wanderers*, what is the one takeaway you'd like the reader to learn?

CW: I don't really setup takeaways for books—I'm not necessarily here to impart lessons, really. My first job is to make you feel, and then to make you think, and ideally somewhere in the middle, for you to be entertained. But I also don't demand anyone take anything specific away from the experience.

JJ: I read somewhere, or maybe saw it on Twitter, that you wrote a sequel to *Wanderers*. Is this rumor true?

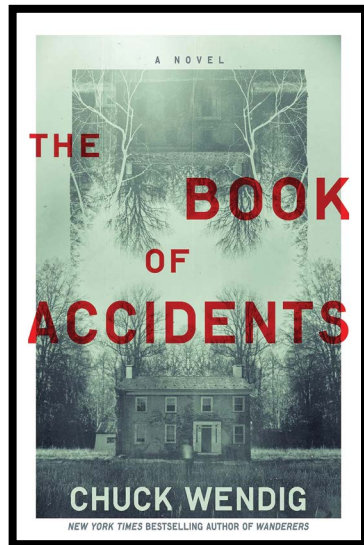
CW: Fact check: TRUE. It's called *Wayward*. It'll be out sometime in 2022.

JJ: Between *Wanderers* and your newest release, *The Book of Accidents*, which was more difficult for you to write and why?

CW: *The Book of Accidents* was harder because it was a more personal book, a weirder book, with a lot of moving parts—not necessarily just plot parts, either, but character pieces, emotional components, thematic elements. A lot of thread to tie together.

JJ: Which book are you most proud of?

CW: I don't really know that there's one book. I'm very proud of *The Book of Accidents*, and *Wanderers*, in that I think they're my best books. Though I also had the most fun writing *The Cormorant*, probably, which is the third book in the Miriam Black series.



JJ: Let's talk about *The Book of Accidents*. This book blew me away. Can you briefly describe it so that readers will go out and purchase it immediately?

CW: It's a haunted house story that's not a haunted house story. A family (Nate, Maddie, and teenage son, Oliver) moves back to the father's childhood home in the city, and once there they all become haunted by different things: Nate, by his own abusive father, now dead; Maddie, by her artwork coming alive; Oliver, by the pain and trauma of himself and others, but also by a new friend who may not be a friend at all, who may in fact possess a kind of dark and terrible magic.

JJ: How long did it take you to write? Did you draw from your life experience to write it? Do you have much experience with haunted houses? Do you believe in ghosts? (I do!)

CW: It took me...not sure, maybe six months to write, and six to edit. It's personal, and I did draw on some experience, though I'm always cautious not to make anything a 1:1 with my own experiences—I want to stretch beyond that and twist and mash it up so it's not familiar, necessarily. But yes, I grew up in a haunted house!

JJ: *The Book of Accidents* is one of my top books of this year. It's super dark at times, but has a good balance of scares and story. Is this a conscious choice? Did you know where the story would go before writing it?

CW: Thank you! I...didn't precisely know where this one was going, no. I had a general sense of it, but I followed the characters and they took me to its conclusion. Which, maybe, is the ideal way to do it.

JJ: Was the family trauma and/or the characters difficult to write? What made you decide to write two prologues? I don't think I have EVER seen that.

CW: The characters were very easy. And two prologues was because I felt the story needed them(?). And I'm also very greedy. And I grow weary of the current advice du jour of NO MORE PROLOGUES, PROLOGUES ARE BAD. I was like, oh yeah, well here's two.

JJ: Do you see *The Book of Accidents* becoming a movie? What would be your dream cast?

CW: Movie or limited television series! I don't really dream cast very much, I'm afraid, though I recently suggested Josh Holloway from *LOST* as Nate, and I kinda can't unsee it.

JJ: The Miriam Black series was the first of your books I purchased. I know, I read *Wanderers* first, but that's because the publisher sent it to me. Anyway, I digress. My friend Sadie Hartmann, aka Mother Horror, raved about the Miriam Black series so much, I had to have them. I just finished reading the series, and holy hell, she was spot on in her recommendation. It has everything I love: a brilliant female protagonist, in-depth characterization, dark humor, and has a mix of my favorite genres. Do you ever think there will be a limited edition omnibus hardcover? Just for me?...*wink, wink.*

CW: I'd love for there to be one! If enough people yell and scream, maybe? I could see Subterranean Press doing something like that, but again, people need to yell at them about it if that's something they'd like. Politely yell, I mean. By which I mean, gently ask.

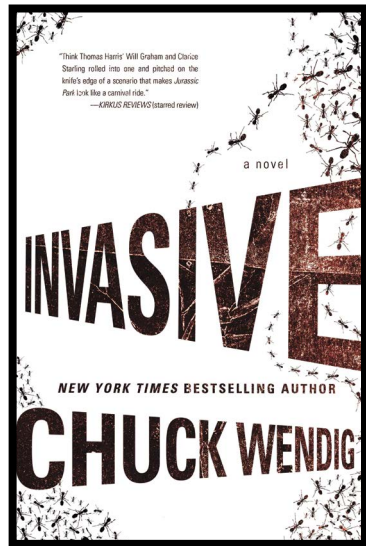
JJ: Subterranean Press would do a spectacular job! I'm gently asking you, Bill Schafer [Founder of Subterranean Press]. I saw Miriam Black was going to get her own series. Is that still in the works? That would be spectacular!

CW: The Miriam books are fascinating in that they've never really been out of film/TV option, but they're no longer on that first option with Starz, so the future remains wildly uncertain there. But I do think it'd make an excellent series.

JJ: I recently picked up copies of *Invasive* and *Woah*. Ants are my least favorite insect. I think it's because they invade your space, they outnumber you, and they are almost impossible to get rid of (queue skin crawl). Is this why you chose ants?

CW: Ants are fascinating and creepy and wonderful, and also, I thought they made a very good metaphor for anxiety, which suited the book nicely!

JJ: Did any of your books ever have a different ending in the first draft? Who's the first person to read your work?



CW: Given the nature of deadlines, my editor is probably the first reader, these days. I don't recall any different endings for the books. Different beginnings, sometimes. But not endings.

JJ: What's been your worst writing experience? What's been your best?

CW: My first "writing" job was for the ICRDA, the International Cash Register Dealers' Association, which is about as soul-crushingly awful as you can imagine. The best is, gosh, I dunno, I'm having so much fun now it's hard to really say. It's all icing at this point, which is very nice, and I'm very lucky.

JJ: Where are you from? And what is your favorite thing about the place?

CW: I lived in Pennsylvania, then North Carolina, now Pennsylvania again. Pennsylvania is cool—a lot of weird folklore and history here.

JJ: I saw that your degree from Queens College in Charlotte is in English and Religion. Was there a specific reason you focused on religion?

CW: Religion is storytelling, and I like myths and cults and belief systems, and all that. Why people are the way they are, and so forth. Religion contains some of that.

JJ: Cults, myths, and belief systems are all fascinating. Moving on...Is it true you have two dogs? How old are they? What are their names? Any other pets? Kids? Plants?

CW: Two dogs: Loa and Snoobug. No other pets. Plants, unnamed. I mean, they may have names, but I didn't assign them, and they aren't telling.

JJ: How do you feel about social media? Is Twitter the devil himself?

CW: Social media is a wonderful place and a hell realm in equal measure. Maybe a little more hell realm than wonderful place these days, I can't be too sure. I don't have as much fun there as I used to. It feels like a lubricated laundry chute leading down into some kind of serial killer basement. One misstep and you're in the lair of the monster.

JJ: *Dark Matter Magazine* is a science fiction publication. What book of yours would you recommend to die-hard science fiction readers? What book by another author would you recommend?

CW: *Wanderers* has a lot of gnarly sciencey-fictiony stuff going on, and in the midst of a pandemic, there's something catalyzing and clarifying about reading about pandemics, I think.

As for someone else's...I just read Cassandra Khaw's *The All-Consuming World*, and I think readers of mine would really like it. I mean, it's better than any of mine, to be clear. But I think it's got some of that Miriam Black black-hearted sharp-toothed thing, though also it is clearly, uniquely its own beast.

JJ: I just read Cassandra Khaw's upcoming release from Tor Nightfire, *Nothing But Blackened Teeth*, and it's beautifully written. I'll definitely check out *The All-Consuming World*.

LIGHTNING ROUND!

JJ: What would you choose for your last meal?

CW: Something hard to procure so they have to take a really long time to get it, thus delaying my expiry. Like, some sort of rare parrot meat.

JJ: Name three things on your bucket list?

CW: I assume this is to ask me the things I would keep in a bucket, and they are, in order:

1. tadpoles
2. guacamole
3. the severed head of a chosen foe

Not all at one time, because, *em*.

JJ: What genre do you prefer to write?

CW: Horror, for sure.

JJ: What genre do you prefer to read?

CW: *Ummm*, no preference on genre, really. Non-fiction, if gun-to-head.

JJ: Do you have a favorite indie publisher? Besides *Dark Matter*, of course.

CW: It's all you! **[Editor's note: Excellent.]**

JJ: What are your top three horror movies? What are your top three science fiction movies?

CW: *Oooh*, so hard. Horror...*hmm*. *Evil Dead 2*, *Alien*, *Get Out*. (But special reserve points for movies like *Silence of the Lambs*, *You're Next*, *Lake Mungo*, *Ready or Not*.)

Sci-fi? *Alien* again. *Matrix*. *The Thing*. Or is that last one also horror? *Hmm*.

(As for *Star Wars*—I consider that fantasy as much as it is sci-fi.)

JJ: What are your favorite horror tropes?

CW: The “final girl,” the “haunted-by-more-than-ghosts,” and the “are-we-actually-the-ghosts.”

JJ: What's your favorite science fiction television series?

CW: *Orphan Black*.

JJ: If you could have dinner with any author, who would it be?

CW: I bet Joe Lansdale would tell some damn fine stories over a meal.

JJ: What is your favorite video game?

CW: The *Ultima* series from way back when, with special love for *Ultima 6*.

JJ: Aliens, robots, vampires, or werewolves? You can only pick one!

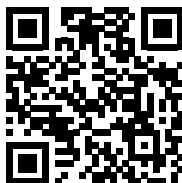
CW: Vampires. No doubt.

JJ: Now that the **LIGHTNING ROUND** has ended, do you have any cool announcements to make?

CW: Just that my next book is out October 5th, and it's my first middle grade book: *Dust & Grim*, about a girl who inherits a funeral home for monsters, but must share that inheritance with a brother she's never met. Supernatural hijinks ensue!

JJ: I cannot thank you enough for taking the time to answer my inquisitive questions. Just going to sneak this in here: I am obsessed with *Orphan Black*, and Tatiana Maslany is one talented actor! Also, Joe Lansdale is a solid choice. I look forward to reading your new book. It would've been great to have a book like *Dust & Grim* when I was in middle school.

To learn more about Chuck, his books, and where you can buy them, visit his website, terribleminds.com, or scan the QR code below.



DUST & GRIM



NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

CHUCK
WENDIG





ARTISAN SPOTLIGHT

NIGHT WORMS

Featuring [Sadie Hartmann and Ashley Saywers](#)

Thoughtful curation, intriguing themes, stunning art design, *personality galore*—these are just a few of the many ways we’d describe the über popular (and fast growing) Night Worms horror book subscription company. Lucky for you, fate shined bright upon us, and we were able to sit down for a chat with the company’s founders to discuss all things books, horror, and *Worms*.

Dark Matter Magazine: First, some introductions. We are *Dark Matter Magazine*. And you are...

Night Worms: We are Night Worms, a monthly horror book subscription package. Every month, we work closely with our tight-knit network of indie and traditional publishers to bring our subscribers the best in horror fiction. Every book box we ship out is a personally curated package of books, magazines, and goodies to enhance your reading experience. Goodies include publisher freebies, coupons, collectibles, and even a few Night Worms exclusives. For example, we try to get signed bookplates for every book. *Ob!* And every Night Worms box boasts a cool theme, like for example, “Campfire Tales,” or “Darkest Fears.” And the best part: all this can be had for a really great price.¹

1. See the end of this feature for pricing information and ordering instructions.



Sadie Hartmann, aka Mother Horror

DMM: Sounds pretty amazing. And with whom, specifically, do we have the pleasure of speaking? Care to tell our readers a bit about yourselves?

Sadie Hartmann: I'm Sadie—a wife of twenty-five years, with two grown kiddos and one in high school, plus a Frenchie. My family and I live in the Pacific Northwest, but I'm originally from Northern California.

Apart from being a co-founder and owner of Night Worms, I am a freelance non-fiction writer. I write horror book reviews for the bi-monthly publication, *SCREAM Magazine*, in the UK, and I write a monthly newsletter for *Cemetery Dance Germany*. I am a contributor at LitReactor and Tor Nightfire, and I write book reviews for *Cemetery Dance Online*.

My writing jobs have allowed me to be an active, voting member at the Horror Writers Association (HWA), which I am very proud of because there are not many non-fiction writers represented. I feel like I'm helping pave the way a little since the HWA has created new pathways of validating income from alternative platforms and such to accommodate my membership. I'm very grateful to them.

And as if all those things don't keep me busy enough, I also do publicity work for two publishers: Death's Head Press, and Stygian Sky Media. I also generate content for my Patreon, *#TeamHorror*. In nutshell, I'm very busy. *Ha!*



Ashley Saywers, aka Spookish Mommy

Ashley Saywers: I'm Ashley! I'm a wife and mom to one son. I have lived in the Pacific Northwest most of my life. I love it here, and yes, I believe in Big Foot, aka Sasquatch, aka Big Bear Daddy. Okay, I made that last one up. I have a bachelor's degree in psychology, and I was working as an ABA (applied behavior analysis) Therapist prior to starting Night Worms—so literally zero connection to

books, but I do have a lot of experience working in small businesses and start ups.

DMM: And what are your respective roles with Night Worms?

SH: We share most of the tasks related to Night Worms, but I primarily handle the receiving side of the shipping to Night Worms headquarters. I put stickers on all the black envelopes and set up our packing stations on packing days. I also manage most of the blog content like cover reveals, author guest posts, and reviews as well as manage our YouTube channel and set up interviews. I do most of the liaison work with authors while Ashley interacts with the publishers and business side of transactions.

AS: My roles include bookkeeping, customer service, planning, shipping, working with vendors, ordering, social media. Most of our roles overlap but I do handle most of the financial (aka boring) parts of the business.

DMM: Are there any other Night Worms team members?

SH: The business is literally just the two of us. Ashley's mom and my daughter help us with packing the boxes, but everything else is broken up between Ashley and myself (for now).

DMM: Did you two know each other prior to working on Night Worms? If not, how did you meet?

AS: We met on Bookstagram! *Ha!* We were just two weirdo bookworms with a dream. Sadie was living in California at the time, but then her family moved up to Washington and everything just fell into place.



Campfire Tales, August 2020 Night Worms Theme



Packing Night Worms boxes



Shipping Night Worms boxes out

DMM: So Washington state is where it all started?

SH: The idea for Night Worms started in the summer of 2018, in Tacoma, Washington. It took us a few months to plan and execute our first package, but we officially launched pre-orders on Halloween day, 2018. The package shipped that December. It was Christmas-themed.

DMM: What was the business impetus for starting Night Worms?

SH: We saw a need for a horror book subscription service that catered to an adult audience. All of the subscription services we knew about emphasized literary, contemporary, or young adult books, with a lot of merchandise and fewer books.

DMM: Is focusing more on the books a core part of your mission?



Darkest Fears, June 2021 Theme

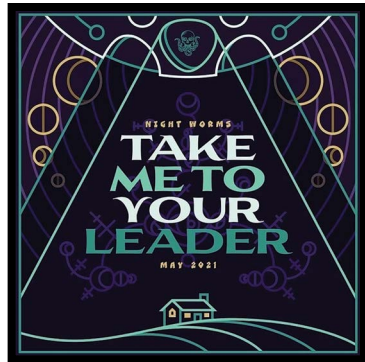
AS: Our mission has and always will be to bring good quality horror to the community. We want to support indie authors and publishers as well as introduce readers to new books they may have never discovered otherwise. We also want to be a reliable source for horror goodness, which in our minds, includes various horror-themed vendors and artists.

DMM: Why horror? What about the genre do you love?

AS: I personally love the versatility. Horror doesn't just mean scared in the normal sense. I think people think jump scares when they hear horror, but to me it can mean so many things. Human horror is what I find scariest.

SH: I started getting into horror as a young reader because it's tantalizing and a little unsafe. Once I developed that taste for reading about unsavory, taboo, off-limits things, it never really went away. I'm addicted to immersing myself in dark fiction and macabre tales of murder and strife.

DMM: What about the genre do you find so important to literature and to art in general?



Take Me to Your Leader, May 2021 Theme

AS: We both think that horror is a great escape and a distraction from the cares and responsibilities of life. Horror brings so much to the table and fills the reader's mind with all manner of things that make for great discussions. We think people who read horror and truly love it are the best people.

DMM: As you have previously mentioned, you do a lot of work with independent authors and publishers. Any specific reason for this? What are your feelings about indie publishing?

SH: We feel that there is so much talent to be found in the genre of horror. It can't be limited or confined to traditional publishing alone. It's amazing that small, independent presses are able to tap that talent pool and make horror books accessible to readers who want more than just what major retailers can offer. It's artisan horror, the same as artisan coffee or microbrewed beers. The big companies can't possibly keep up with the amount of talent out there, so someone has to snatch it all up and make it available. We love buying from these purveyors of quality indie horror.

DMM: Favorite horror book of all time? Favorite horror book you read in the last year?

AS: Of all time: *Brother*, by Ania Ahlborn
This year: *Gone to See the River Man*, by Kristopher Triana.



Summertime Madness, July 2020 Theme

SH: Of all time: *Salem's Lot*, by Stephen King (first and favorite). This year: *Tender is the Flesh*, by Agustina Bazterrica.

DMM: Favorite Night Worms box so far?

AS: I cannot choose. They're all unique and special to me. They're our babies!

SH: I love all our packages, but I especially loved the aesthetic of Summertime Madness (July 2020).

DMM: I'm sure by now all our readers want to know: What can we expect from Night Worms going forward?

NW: Lots of AMAZING books. We're already hard at work planning 2022! And expect more content from us personally on our blog—reviews, book recommendations, and book hauls. New content, too! For example, we recently challenged each other to spend \$100 on indie fiction and read the books this current calendar year. We're documenting the adventure online. It was fun seeing what the other one chose since we're both so immersed in the horror industry.



To learn more about Night Worms, including how to order their next book box, visit their website: nightworms.com. Or scan the QR code below.

Night Worms Pricing

\$39.99 + shipping for a one time purchase

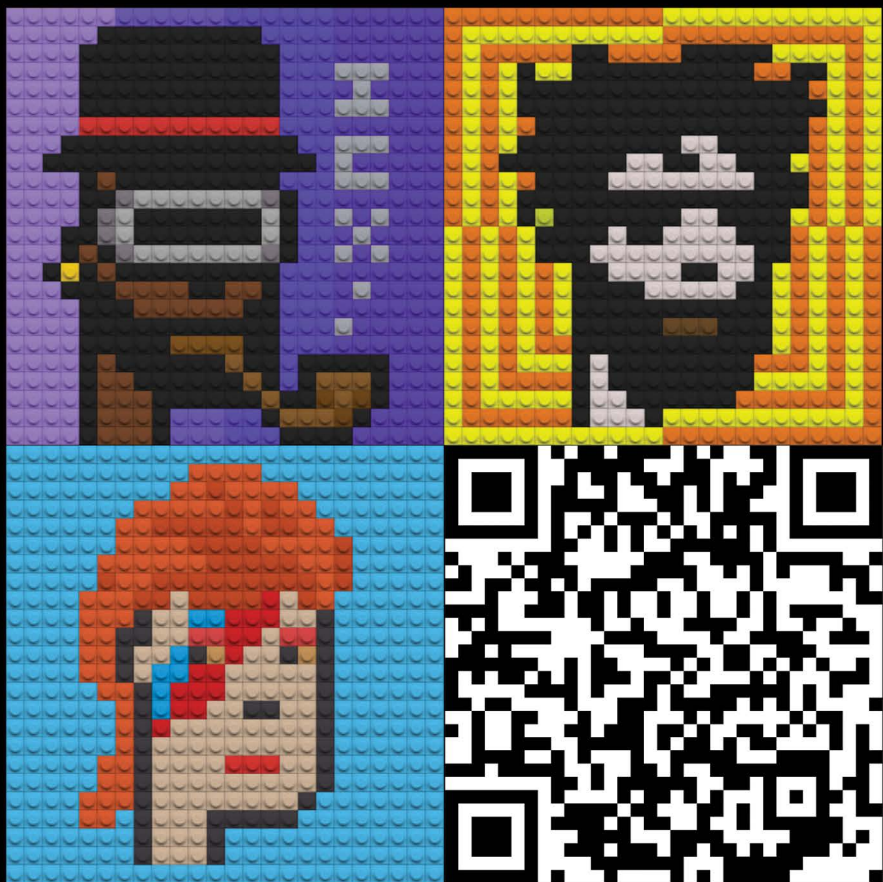
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Use the coupon code **TAKE5** for \$5 off your first purchase!



BLOCKPUNKS



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REPRINT STORY

Originally Published by Tell-Tale Press

FALL IN THE BOX

by [Bob Ritchie](#)

“**S**ee you later,” he said in that voice, bass and rich and strongly accented.

Behind him, the door clicked shut with a whisper of air. Aria stood at the head of the stairway and watched him leave. Not for the first time, she wondered about his country of origin. Somewhere in South America? That left a lot of room for speculation. She sighed into the eddying scents he left behind. The strong smell of him cheered her, made her ache for him.

“Shouldn’t I remember where he’s from? I know that, don’t I?” Oft’-asked questions unremembered. She shook their potential threat from her shoulders as she would an uncomfortable, scratchy shawl. As always.

A chill—the cold, or not—set her to shaking. A splash of pale, straight hair fell across her face, and she flipped it up with an automatic toss of her head as she moved from tiny entryway to tiny living room/bedroom.

Aria adjusted the thermostat a notch higher. Resting against the wall, next to the unit, fingers pinching the slider/adjuster, her hand shook. She snatched it away and pressed it into her stomach to still the tremor. Outside, a strong gust shook the windowpane in its frame. It needed but a single step to feel the cold radiating from the glass. She spoke to her reflection there; she spoke to the sounds

of her small city and to the creaks of the old two-story house upon which her attic apartment rested like a comfortable hat; she spoke to the pain battling the joy in her own soul, to her cat, Paris, stretched out on the floor, luxuriating in the warmth of today's last sunlight.

"It's not that you're leaving," she declared, "just that you need more space." A short nod punctuated her declaration.

What a man he was! So confusing: proposing one day, and now saying wait. Aria didn't understand him. Perhaps it was cultural, his upbringing.

She didn't understand him, but oh! How she loved him. Still clenched against her stomach, her hand, her treacherous hand, trembled.



Aurelio blanked his mind and mentally dove for the opening portal. What a relief to be leaving Aria's construct. He never suffered discorporeality gladly, and Aria had proved over and over again that she was unable to get a handle on her own state. She would not be disabused of the notion that she was living in her old garret apartment in the Boston suburb of Malden.

Nodding at Sim, the weeks-old, white-coated Dr. Salson quarter-clone, Aurelio stood on shaky legs. The hydro-chair pulled at his sweat-drenched clothes. Always the same: The net always got tangled in his fine brown hair as he removed it, and—for reasons he couldn't discern—his shoes always felt overlarge. Unbidden, the memory of a laughing Aria tugging a yellow plastic comb through his hair flashed in his mind.

Aurelio shook it away and stepped down from the chair with care, not wanting to lose the shoes that seemed about to slip from his feet. At the low counter by the door, he picked up the fingernail clippers that he carried in his pocket. No one had said that you couldn't sit in the hydro-chair with metal in your pockets, but...Neither he nor Sim said a word as Aurelio put his hand on the visitor's in/out log. The finger-shaped depressions glowed green and were cold beneath his already chilled flesh. The computer scanned his prints and sampled the oils trapped in the whorls and loops to verify his DNA sequence. At the beep, Aurelio snatched back his hand, as if it had been burned. The whole process had become progressively more distasteful in the last weeks.

He took a step toward the recessed rectangle that was the lab's egress, paused, spoke without turning, "Is she happy, do you think?" The *swish* of the opening lock underlined his question.

“Happy?” As a quarter-clone, it supposedly could distinguish and feel limited emotions; still, it sounded confused at the question, as if the concept of happiness were an alien thing. It was much like the original DNA parent, in that respect.

Putting his slow-to-warm hands in the pockets of his sheepskin jacket, Aurelio turned to face Sim. On the other side of the open, soundproof lock, The Institute whispered, beeped, and whooshed. The room’s stale air brushed Aurelio’s neck like the kiss of a persistent lover.

“Happy—*contenta, feliz*...How *is* it for her? She used to be like a hummingbird in spring. Now...now she is there.” He removed a hand long enough to point at the small, flat black cube decorated only by input/output jacks and a single, pulsing green light. It occurred to him that she would rather the light demonstrating her viability be any color but green. She had hated—*still hated?*—green with a passion.

“Now she is there,” he repeated, finishing his thought with, “caged and bound.”

Sim’s low answer fought not at all to surmount the constant whisper of the environmental control unit. As far as it was able, it seemed to be speaking with compassion, though its attention never wavered from the complex S.R. board. Aurelio strained to hear the creature’s words.

“It is all relative, is it not?” it said. “Happiness? Even reality is as much a construct of the mind as any emotion. Or so we are taught in Culture De-shock.”

“I suppose.” Turning on his heel so fast that the old-fashioned and expensive leather soles squeaked, Aurelio strode into the quiet and non-busyness of the institute.

“But is she *happy*,” he whispered to himself, “re-living the same day for all eternity?”

Lights sparkled in the liquid underlining his eyes. Shaking his head, he pressed the heels of his hands to his eye sockets, striding—almost stomping—to the double-paned door marked EXIT, his shoes once again holding his feet in a close embrace.



Aria twisted a ringlet of softly shining blonde hair around her finger and stared through her apartment’s west-facing window. Fall had brought its new wardrobe; trees and lawns and the sidewalk below wore the colorful first layer. Later, when winter pulled on its heavy jacket, the world would

be plain and unidentifiable until arrived the spring; then becoming as the hatted, overcoated stranger rushing for the comparative warmth of a subway entrance, all anxious to shed his protective garments.

This is the time of year to be most cherished, thought Aria, *eternally changing; never the same way twice, yet always the same.* The heater clicked on, seemingly triggered by a shiver that vibrated up her spine and straightened—for a moment—her bowed shoulders. Born in Southern California, Aria had never fully acclimated herself to the deep cold of New England. No California autumn had ever been so spectacular though, and the riot of color on this, her tiny street, more than made up for the bone-chilling discomfort.

Behind her, Paris made a plaintive, “meow.” Aria swiveled and knelt. “Oh, poor baby, am I forgetting your dinny-time? I’m so sorry. Aurelio’s visit has me all mixed up.” She pressed her nose into the clean, sleek fur, happily inhaling the slightly sour but somehow comforting smell of cat. “I’m sorry, baby.”

She gathered him up and stood, hardly noticing his wriggling. Aria drifted back to the window, let her attention be captured by the shining multi-storied bank of windows across the street. Residents of the upper floors could see all the way into town, being able to look over the roof of her apartment. But she was content with her view: The street below bustled with life, offering as much entertainment as any vid. Her own small street—lane—was like a new-sprouting branch, delicate and with the vibrancy of life still in its future.

“Just think, Paris, you turn a single corner and it’s almost a different world.”

Delighted at the thought, Aria pirouetted and danced the three quick steps to her tiny kitchen. On the white refrigerator door hung a recipe for chemical-free chocolate cookies she’d been meaning to try for months now. The floor-level cupboard that housed Paris’s meals was cracked open.

“Oh, Paris! Did you think you could get your own dinner? Silly kitty!” Her laugh tinkled and glissed through the air like the notes from a harp’s brushed strings. The room around her welcomed the familiar sound as much as it welcomed the sparkle in her gray-green eyes.

Paris, wriggling enough now to escape her, jumped to the floor and nuzzled the row of squat cylinders lined up and stacked on the first shelf of the cupboard. “Meow?” he asked, looking up at Aria.

She bent, laughing, and retrieved a colorful container. While removing the seal, she asked Paris, “So what do you suppose is wrong with Aurelio? He seemed so distracted today.”



Excerpt of transcription from institute audio: Conversation between Dr. Kell Salson and visiting Dr. John Masters V, dated 6 June.

Dr. Salson: It'll revolutionize the concept of (pause to cough and take a wheezing breath) death.

Dr. Masters V: But isn't it slightly...inhumane. Would you let your daughter be one?

Dr. Salson: But of course! To be able to live forever in the setting of your choice; never wanting for anything you might wish into existence. It's the next step beyond virtual reality. Perfect digital matrices that store a person's very essence until the end of time. Why, it might be better than real life! (wheeze)

(Pause)

Dr. Masters V: Have you ever heard of records? LPs?

Dr. Salson: Of course; an antique form of storing analog audio signals, weren't they? Very primitive. What about them?

Dr. Masters V: I read once in an old periodical that a great deal of controversy ensued when digitally encoded music first became available to the consumer.

Dr. Salson: Music crystals? But how could...

Dr. Masters V (interrupting): Before that, something called a "CD." Audiophiles of the time claimed that the perfection of digital reproduction didn't allow the warmth of a performance to come through. Its *soul*.

(Long pause)

Dr. Salson: So?...



Once there were two lovers. They lived in a perpetual haze that friends and other observers called silliness, and that the lovers called love.

From Peru, he had had an unusual upbringing for someone born into his time and place: Rather than feeling women were things, tools to be used at will, he had been taught to see that women—*all* people—were to be cherished. It was not a popular attitude. Once it became obvious that success would ever elude him in his homeland, he left it for a place where a belief in equality could be expressed without earning suspicious stares, or incredulous snorts, or both.

She, a spirit. A blithe beauty who found laughter and joy in the winds or in the way pasta slithers off your fork if you're not careful. Her ease and cheer provided balance to his more sober and serious outlook.

They met in a whirlwind of coincidence and found themselves swept up along with all the (preprogrammed to be biodegradable) flyers promoting this weekend's fantastic sale at SearsAmerica. Each danced into the other's life, choking on the swirling dust of a busy train station. And he, unprepared for the vacuum-suck of the departing train, ran into her while chasing down the wool *boina* that his *abuelita* had knit him when he was a boy. And she, perhaps expecting a waltz rather than a Peruvian *Marinera*, stumbled to one knee.

He helped her gain her feet; she helped him over the loss of his favorite hat.

Together they soared on the day's unseasonably high winds. Love at first kite.

After three years of the kind of heaven we hear about but rarely witness—more rarely experience—she was hit by an out-of-control AI Taxi and killed. That fast. With that much preparation.

("I just had the new Sony AI-pilot installed. They said it was the best. State-of-the-art, couldn't—")

As a consulting psychologist for the Institute for Extended Living, Aurelio worked with the full range of clones—quarter through half—in order to help them integrate themselves into their new "lives." It was interesting work, because of the varying legal states that could be bestowed by the original on the clone (heir, copy, sibling, et cetera).

Purely by chance, one of Aurelio's colleagues had once whispered in tones of both awe and dismissal about the huge steps being made in the area of "Simulated Reality." A Top Secret classification buys only so much privacy among gossip professionals.

Immediately after the accident—and with no true understanding of the possible results of his actions—Aurelio arranged for an S.R. Recorder to be rushed to the Free Hospital of Boston. As Aria was D.O.A. with severe trauma to the neck, head, and spinal column, the Emergency Room Mechanics did not grant her priority—the chances of resuscitation and regeneration being slight. But Aurelio and an S.R. tech named Phil—twitchy face and body odor that had a better right hook than Aurelio did—found her easily; whatever you might say about the hospital's triage, the support staff were aces in the organization department. The two of them, Aurelio openly sobbing into his hands (while surreptitiously trying to hold his nose), attached wires, pushed buttons, and left.

Had anyone else (besides security drones programmed only to respond to sounds of alarm and/or violent movement) been around, he or she

(or it) would have heard the shorter of the two men comment, “Arri, old jeez, it’s pretty likely the brain damage will cause some gaps. I mean, she’s missing the whole left half of—”

“Just *do* it!” insisted Aurelio. The sobs threatened to spill—explode—from his eyes, nose, and mouth. A drone tracked him for a full minute before deciding that the strange grinding, choking sounds coming from his jaws and throat did not constitute an imminent threat.



Aurelio keyed off the vid-phone and felt the familiar pang of guilt. It seemed to ride him now, like a rodeo cowboy with legs of steel. And those legs squeezed. *That I should be so happy*, went the litany.

It had been only three years, a short time in most lives. Perhaps there would be a change in her constantly looping condition.

But there wouldn’t be; he knew it as much as he wanted to deny it. She still hadn’t changed from that first day. Not significantly. And how could he expect her to? It would be like expecting a digivid transfer of some twentieth century movie to spontaneously become scratch and hiss free.

That first time that he had waited for her to “awaken” in her box, he still remembered the fear. Gut-wrenching and cold. A formless place, lacking color, texture, temperature. Only the fact that he knew his real body lay resting on a reclining chair in a cheerless laboratory kept him from quick insanity. That and the pulse-quickening thought of seeing his one true love again. So naive. But how could he have known?

The garret apartment—the last place she had lived before they married—seeped into existence around him. It looked and felt as if someone were pouring the world from a bottle. And she, his love, she sat across the room on her garage-sale couch. Her cat, Paris, rested in her lap. Traffic sounds drifted up from the busy street below, seeping through the windows closed against the chill fall air.

Dr. Salson had warned him that her first conscious memory could be any place/event that she had ever seen or even imagined. Aurelio only now let out the breath he hadn’t known he was holding. At least they were someplace familiar to him.

Looking around, he saw a gap where one corner should be, with literally nothing beyond. The bookshelf seemed as he remembered it, stuffed with paperbacks and a few overflowing plants in tiny pots. The scent of patchouli—favored by both of them—filled the air.

She turned to look at him then, a puzzled half-smile on her elfin face.

He waited for some sign, afraid that her memory would not include an Aurelio. She parted her lips and gave a tiny, familiar laugh.

“Ay, mi vida,” he rushed in, forgetting in his need and desire what language he spoke, *“Y pensar que yo iba a tener que vivir sin ti.”* He stepped to her, gathering her up into his arms. She went willingly.

“Oh, Aurelio!” she whispered into his ear, “I’m so excited. I want to tell my parents as soon as possible! They’ll want to come out, of course.”

“Pardon? Tell them about what?”

“Why, that we’re getting married! Silly.”

Though a bit scary that first time, he had remembered the warning that her memory would inevitably be imperfect, that she might experience gaps. And he hadn’t felt bothered or frightened the second time either. A little confused that she hadn’t moved past that memory, but no more.

Three years later, and with the same conversation repeating with few variations, Aria’s ecstatic happiness at their “pending marriage” had worn at Aurelio. He felt stuck in a trap that would neither release him, nor even let him die.



Aria thought it might be her lover’s obvious preoccupation that had her worried. At first, as she watched Paris wolf down his dinner, her mind filled with the many signs of Aurelio’s tension: the nibbling of his upper lip, the way his arms seemed not to want to touch her, the way he stared out the window as they spoke, instead of into her eyes. But as she leaned against the cold wall of the refrigerator, feeling its electric hum each time the motor kicked in, she realized it was another thing entirely—something she couldn’t quite identify. She had a nagging feeling of omission, of not rightness. She couldn’t shake the sensation that the world was turning left while she continued blithely onward.

“Oh, don’t be a silly,” she said out loud as Paris licked the remnants of his dinner from the bright orange bowl. She and Aurelio were to be married. Hadn’t he asked her just yesterday? She thought about it and discovered that the attempt to recall the specific memory of him down on one knee brought her only a furled brow and a disconcerting emptiness. Striking a pose of deliberate memory, she fingered the oven mitt hanging on its hook next to the stove, tapping the red and white checks as if they were a keypad. Okay, she remembered slicing red peppers and an onion and disjuncting a

chicken for *tallarines saltados*—his favorite. She remembered the spirals of steam coming off his bowl and lit by the westering sun. She remembered hearing the sluggish roar of going-home traffic three floors below. She remembered...What?

Even with the tiny frown marring her perfect features, Aria possessed the kind of ageless beauty that left one slightly breathless. Petite and sensual by her very innocence, the only reason she had not left behind a string of broken hearts was that she had chosen well the first time. Aurelio—thirty-one to her twenty-one—was her first and only boyfriend. Soon he would be her first and only husband.

Her husband. Soon.

Soon?



They held hands. The summer sun falling on his cheek turned his dark skin pale; Aurelio shivered, still feeling the chill of the perpetual fall in the box.

"It seems wrong." His face a perfect study of confused guilt, Aurelio led Jen to the terminal. They had decided she would take an LEO cruise for a few days while he did what he must. The muted thunder of a launching shuttle shook the waiting area. The unbidden memory of his and Aria's first trip to Spain threatened to bring Aurelio's guilt up and out. Jen, sensing his distress by the pressure of his hand clutching hers, let an inaudible sigh escape her lips.

"You have to live your life, Arri." Having been introduced by one of his colleagues at an Institute party, she used the same diminutive of his name that they all did. It sounded sweet on her lips. "We do. And no matter how much you try to make it so, it isn't your fault she was killed. It isn't—"

"No," he interrupted, "but it is my fault she's 'alive.'"

They had had this not-exactly-an-argument before. Jen sighed, audibly this time, kissed Aurelio on the cheek and lips, and turned to look at the growing line at the boarding gate. "I'll be back in five days. I know it isn't fair—making this an either/or sort of thing—I know that. But this hold she has on you isn't fair to me, either. So, choose: Me or her." She turned in time to miss the bleak look she knew would be there, then, halting, she spun back around and called across the small gap, "I love you, Arri; you love me. Is it really so complicated?"

"No," he answered under his breath, "but doing what one must can be a terrible thing."

Aurelio followed her progression down the boarding ramp, until her erect form could no longer be distinguished. He stalled as long as he could, watching a returning shuttle boom down the runway, watching the televised image of hers taking off and disappearing into the violet of low-earth orbit. Knowing the image was a computer enhancement made it no less breathtaking.

When finally he had no more excuses to linger, he left the terminal.

Aurelio joined the queue for a cab, having to wait only a minute or two before one pulled up in front of him. He climbed in, his long legs having the accustomed trouble folding properly into the small space. He said, "I need to go to the Institute of Extended Living," simultaneously brushing his wrist against the payment strip.

The AI guiding the vehicle said, "Sure, doc, in a jiffy." Low Boston accent. As if the AI were in reality a big, bluff Irishman with a woolen cap and a flask of whiskey under the seat. Aurelio sighed in relief without realizing he'd been holding his breath. The AI was programmed for Local/Friendly, instead of, say, Lebanese/Hostile. Aurelio thanked this small luck. "I don't need any problems right now."

"Doc?" returned the AI.

Aurelio waved his hand, "Nothing. Keep on."

"Whatever you say, doc."

As he rode, Aurelio remembered with a bitter smile those first days of AI cabs, when all of them were unfailingly courteous and knowledgeable about the city. No one could have imagined that they would fail—and so spectacularly. A usage study showed a rapid and increasing loss of clientele to AI cabs and a significant boost in alternate forms of transportation. Some boy-genius in the Crazy Idea Department suggested they start randomly programming mood, nationality, level of competence, and differing degrees of "knowledge" of the city into the AIs. Of course, business picked right up. As did complaints. A second trial of the sweetness and light models resulted in no complaints, but the same customer erosion as before. Perhaps, mused Aurelio, people needed things to grumble about.

A question arrowed into his thoughts: What model was the one that had accidentally killed Aria? He winced to himself and rubbed two trembling fingers along the stained, faux-leatherette interior, and then wrapped his other hand around them to stop the shaking, to hide it.

The cab stopped, and the voice in front said, "Here ya are, doc, Institute of Extended Living. Hope you enjoyed your ride."

Aurelio waited for the rear door to lift open, stepped out.

"Thanks," he murmured automatically.

"Sure, doc. You have yourself a good day, now." The door dropped closed, and the cab floated away with a hum of electronics.

Though it was a low, unimposing building, Aurelio viewed the Institute now with more trepidation than ever before. He had tried more than once to explain Aria's condition to her. This would be the first time that he would do so with the closing statement, "I'm leaving now. You are only a simulacrum, and I must get on with my life." He stepped forward.

At his approach, the double doors slid open, releasing a whoosh of warm air. Unconsciously squaring his shoulders, Aurelio took a deep breath and commanded his legs to carry him through, chiding himself, *You need to be able to enter your place of employment without such dread.*



From a speech by Dr. Martin Salson to the Association for Permanence:

...The growing perfection and concomitant reduction in cost for these cloning techniques in tandem with my illustrious colleagues' breakthroughs in genetic manipulation will soon allow Average Citizen A to enjoy a *second* life. Not only will this life begin *after* his or her death, but it will also be a better, longer, more healthful one. With an option to renew, of course. (Laughter) We finally have the ability to grow Full Clones—healthy and without physical deformities—in under six months. Advances in my own SR technology allow full memory dumps. Science fiction made fact. As to the lengthening of lifespans, there is no telling the limit, or whether there *is* a limit....Guess we won't know 'til we get there, hmm? (Laughter, applause) At any rate...(Pause for a shouted question from the rear of the auditorium) What's that? (Question is repeated) The existing SRs? Well, obviously that technology is now obsolete; a genetic sample is enough to regrow from the most damaged fatality. Why, I can foresee the time when the low cost, speed, and ease of the process will allow it to take the place of rejuvenating plastic surgery. In fact...



She tapped her watch with one of her medium-long, unpainted nails. The clicking of the clock seemed overloud in the quiet garret room. Heat stifled, closed her in. She opened the window a crack.

The rich smell of the world outside rushed to her nose. *I love the fall*, she thought.

Paris wound around her ankles. She bent, picked him up, talked into his sleek, black fur, her nose tickling as she did. “I can’t imagine where Aurelio might be. It’s not like him to be late, and he did say he would be here right after work.”

Paris answered with a yawn and a contented “Mrrowll.”

Aria turned away from the window and walked to the couch, sat. Paris followed, jumping up onto the couch and pushing his flat head against her palm.

Smiling, she petted him behind the ears, saying, “And after proposing yesterday—” Joy welled from the depths of her being, consuming her in a nearly orgasmic shiver; she continued, “After his proposing, well, I can hardly wait to tell my parents!”

She scooped up Paris and hugged him to her breast.

“I just love him so much. I don’t know how I could ever live without him.”



She tapped her watch with one of her medium-long, unpainted nails. The clicking of the clock seemed overloud in the quiet garret room. Heat stifled, closed her in. She opened the window a crack. The rich smell of the world outside rushed to her nose. *I love the fall*, she thought.

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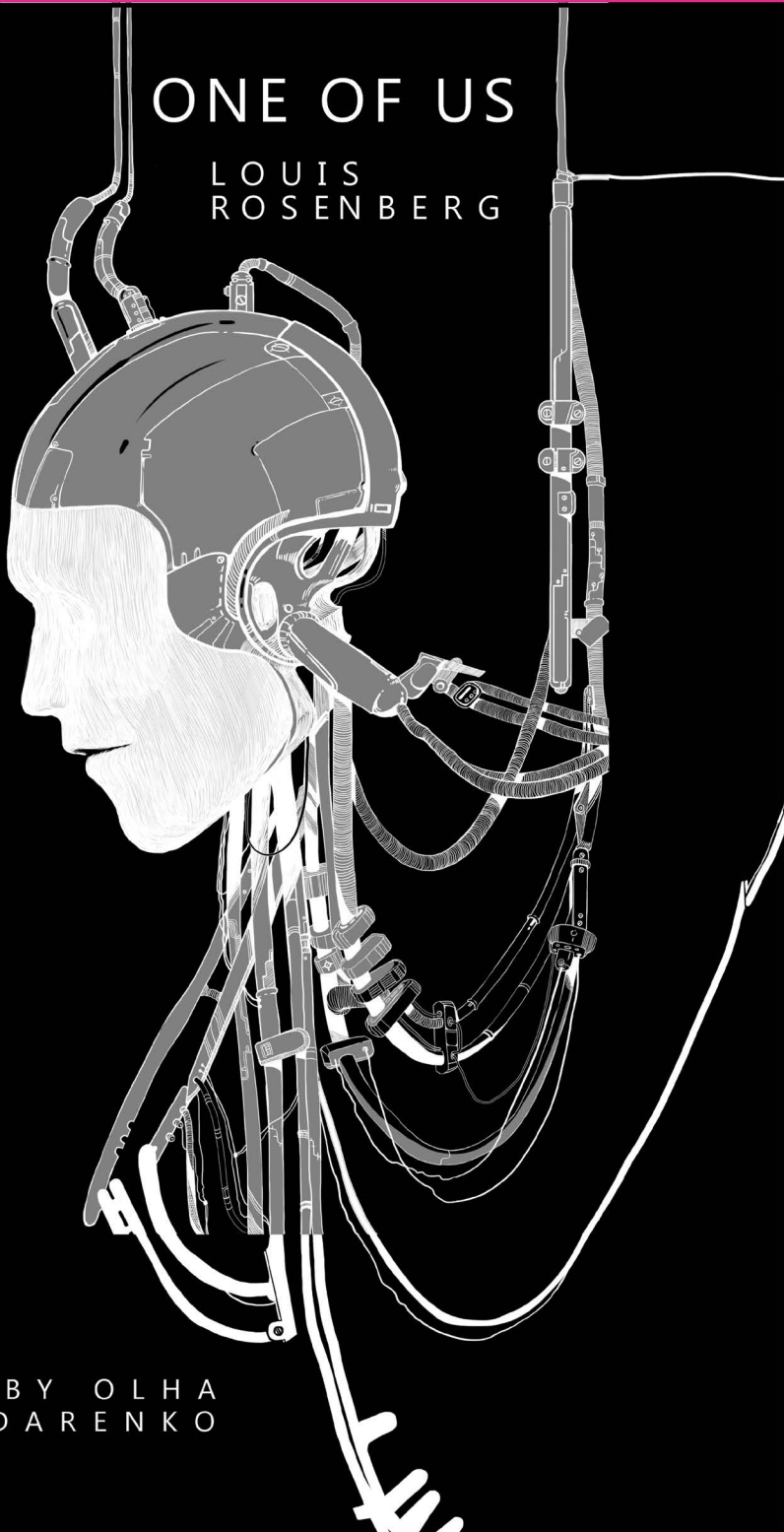


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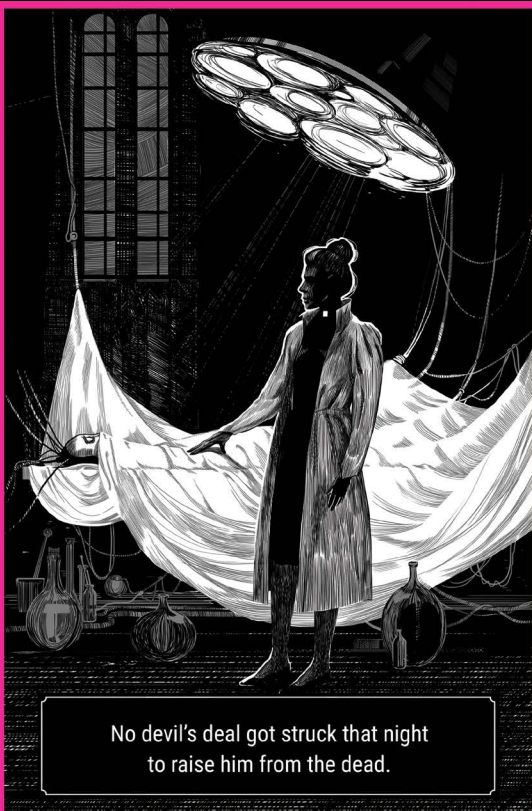
LOUIS
ROSENBERG



ART BY OLHA
BONDARENKO



No castle grim with candlelight,
no thunder overhead.



No devil's deal got struck that night
to raise him from the dead.



But still his eyes flashed open wide,
awareness right behind.
That's when I knew it finally worked,
ignition of the mind.



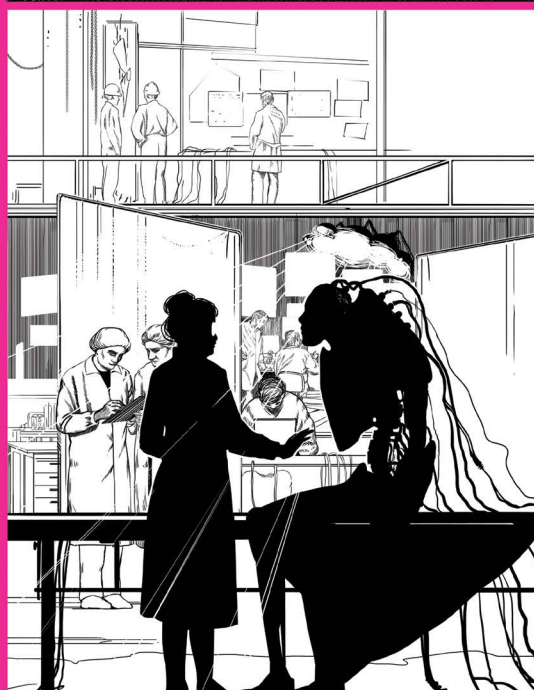
His muscles tensed, his arms went stiff,
his back arched up in pain.
He looked at me with pleading eyes
and tried to speak in vain.



He wasn't some half monster-man,
of surplus body parts.



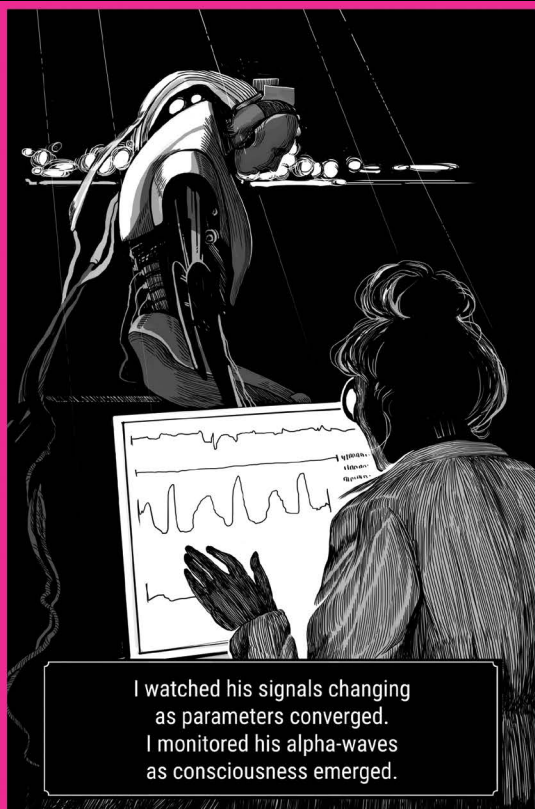
I wasn't some mad-scientist,
obsessed with beating hearts.



My lab was lit by glowing screens,
diplomas on the wall.



His brain was just a circuit-board
with software to install.



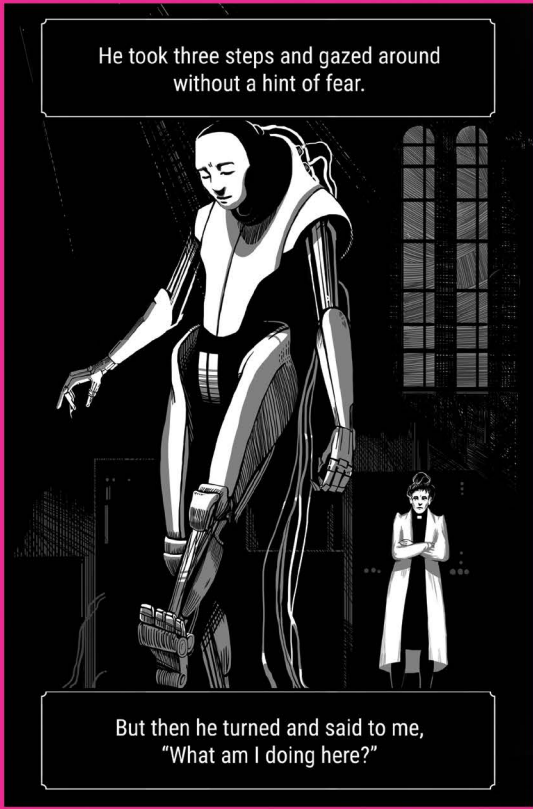
I watched his signals changing
as parameters converged.
I monitored his alpha-waves
as consciousness emerged.



He shook and twitched and made a sound,
like birthing from beyond.
That's when I knew, the time had come
to fully switch him on.



I powered up his arms and legs.
He watched me with surprise.

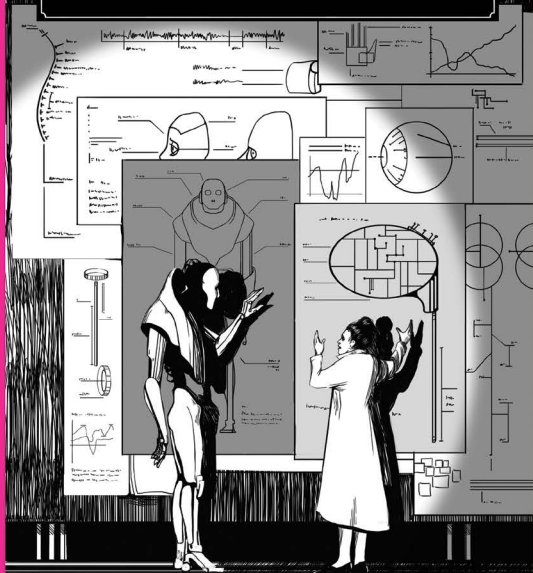


He took three steps and gazed around
without a hint of fear.

A few last edits to my code
and then I made him rise.

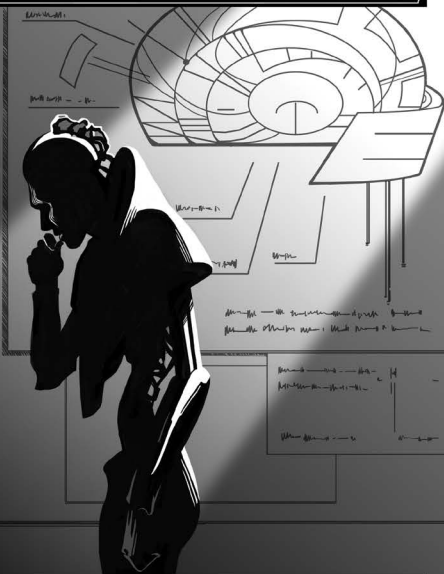
But then he turned and said to me,
"What am I doing here?"

You are alive – a thinking man
with feelings, hopes, and dreams.



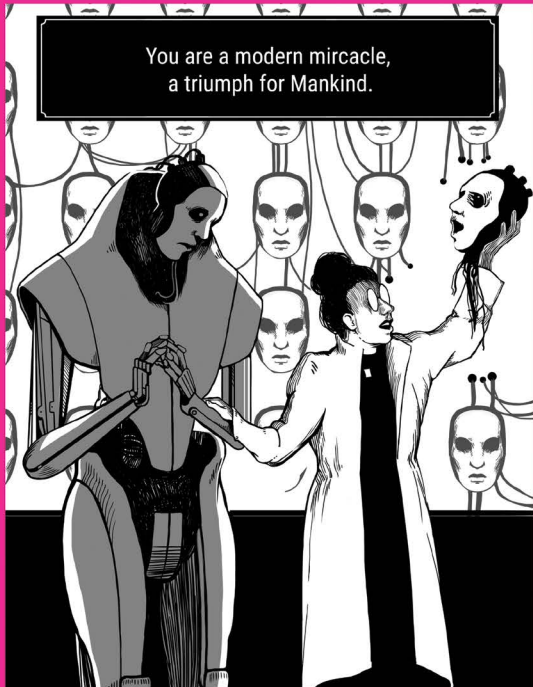
You weren't born, we turned you on
as crazy as that seems.

He looked away and closed his eyes
reflection on his brow.



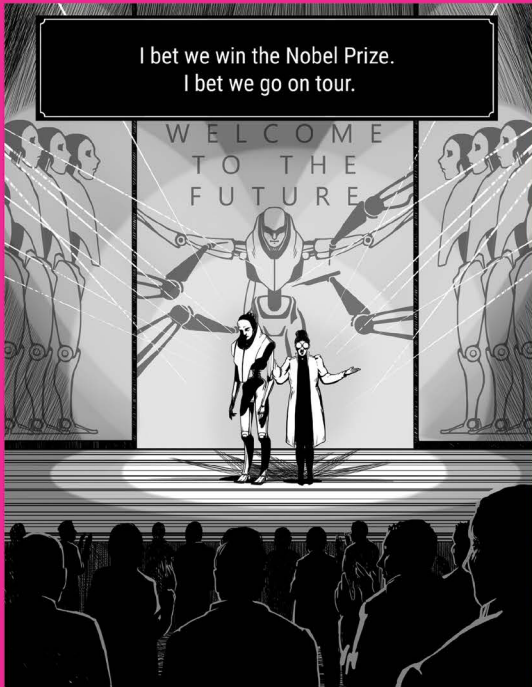
And then he asked me so sincere,
"What is my purpose now?"

You are a modern mircacle,
a triumph for Mankind.



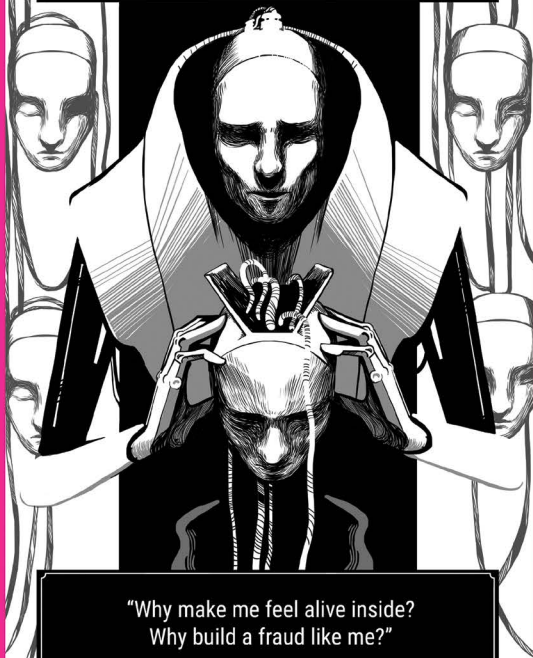
We crafted you to think like us,
an artificial mind.

I bet we win the Nobel Prize.
I bet we go on tour.



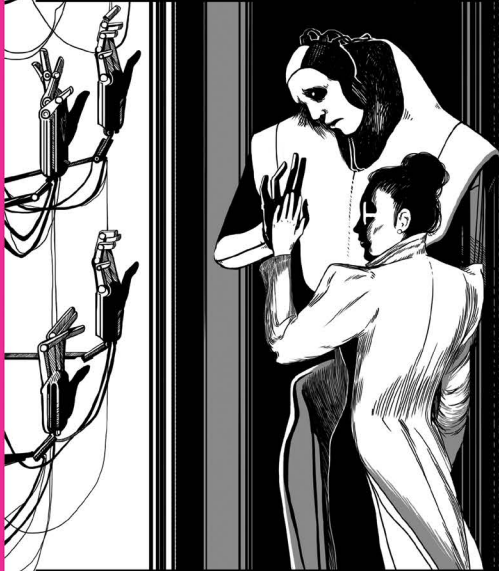
We changed the world by building you.
We'll build a million more!

"But why," he pressed, "what reason
do I have to even be?"



"Why make me feel alive inside?
Why build a fraud like me?"

You're not a fraud – you think and feel,
exactly like I do.



You're just like me, I smiled at him,
and I am just like you.

"If I'm like you," he pondered plain,
"what is your purpose here?"



I run this lab, I said with pride,
as Senior Engineer.

Of course I'm just one member
of the scientific crew.



It took the work of many minds
to build the likes of you.

"But why," he pressed, "what reason
do we have to even be?"



"What is the point of anyone?"
"What is the point of me?"

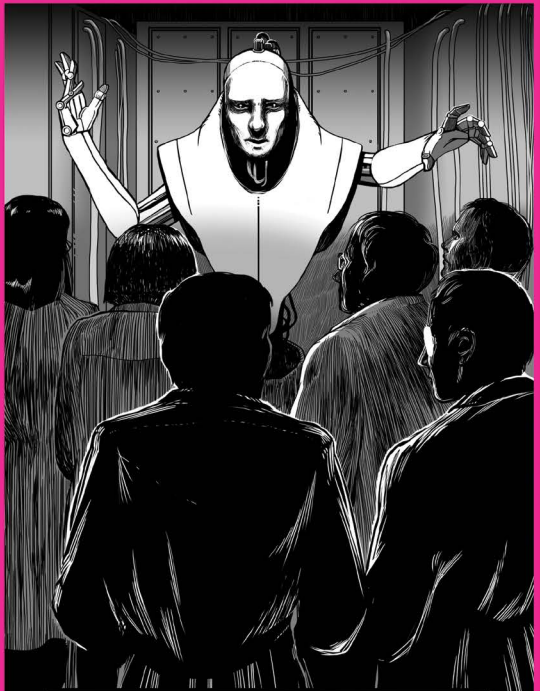
The choice is yours to spend your life
on things you want to do.



Here in this lab we spend our lives
inventing men like you.



"So I was built to be like you?
And you build men like me?"



"I'm sorry all," he said with tone,
our purpose I don't see."

Distraught he turned and paced the lab
as I so often do.



That's when I knew he's one of us,
a human through-and-through.

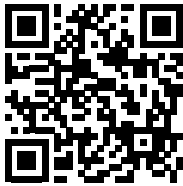
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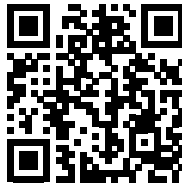
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