

Corner Bar Magazine

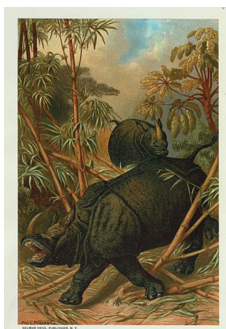
Volume 9 Number 8

Page 1 – PERMANENT HAPPINESS by Erik Buchanan. Mr. Buchanan is a previously unpublished writer from Pennsylvania in the good ol' US of A. He currently has a magical life working nightshift security, which, while not beating Capitalism, has tricked it by giving him the time to write. When not working on his own stories, he enjoys a wide spectrum of fiction and non-fiction. Some favored artists include Kurt Vonnegut, H.P. Lovecraft, Carl Sagan, and too many more to mention.

Page 6 – THE RIDER by J. J. Poret. J.J. Poret is a part time writer who lives in Thailand and works in Kazakhstan. While that does make for a long commute, it gives him time to worry about things that he can't control. J.J. grew up in Louisiana and currently doesn't have any pets.

Page 12 – THE GOLEM by Gary Duehr. Mr. Duehr has taught creative writing for institutions including Boston University, Lesley University, and Tufts University. His MFA is from the University of Iowa Writers Workshop. In 2001 he received an NEA Fellowship, and he has also received grants and fellowships from the Massachusetts Cultural Council, the LEF Foundation, and the Rockefeller Foundation. Journals in which his writing has appeared include *Agni*, *American Literary Review*, *Chiron Review*, *Cottonwood*, *Hawaii Review*, *Hotel Amerika*, *Iowa Review*, *North American Review*, and *Southern Poetry Review*. His books include **Point Blank** (In Case of Emergency Press), **Winter Light** (Four Way Books) and **Where Everyone Is Going To** (St. Andrews College Press).

Page 15 – DYING TO LIVE by Alexandra Balasa. Dr. Balasa is a Romanian-Canadian writer with her PhD in literature from the University of Texas at Dallas. Her dissertation is a collection of psychologically-oriented short stories accompanied by a theoretical book titled **Liminal Bodies: The Grand Narratives of Myth, Magic, Religion, and Science in the Evolution of Speculative Literature**. She has worked with *The Spectorial*, the University of Toronto's speculative fiction magazine, been the Assistant Editor for *Reunion: The Dallas Review*. Although she ponders existentialism, is obsessed with owls, and collects rocks, Alex promises she is not a cliché. After all, she does not own any cats (though she is a proud cat aunt and cat sister). She writes speculative fiction with a psychological edge, and her writing explores questions of identity and moral ambiguity. Her writing has appeared in venues such as PodCastle, Cosmic Roots and Eldritch Shores, and Deep Magic. This fall, she is beginning a position as an Assistant Professor of English at Beacon College in Leesburg, Florida.



“PERMANENT HAPPINESS”

by ERIK BUCHANAN

It was the start of another day for Ned as he made his way to the train station through trash-filled streets. Every day, more and more homeless appeared on his journey, their weather-beaten, twisted bodies scuttling among used condoms and syringes. Ned would occasionally need to step over a body frozen in the embrace of rigor mortis. Sometimes, a needle would stick out of an ice-cold vein like a flag, as if Death were staking its claim. Today, his trip wasn't only free of the recently deceased, but for the first time in a while, he had hope. After work today, he would see his doctor about a life-changing medical breakthrough.

At the station, Ned smashed his way into an overcrowded train car and breathed in the collective smells of body odor and urine-stained upholstery. As the train lurched to life, he and his fellow passengers collided with one another. Further up the car, the jostling provoked a fight, but the offended parties were so tightly packed together that they could not throw punches. Instead, they started spitting and biting at each other's faces until both were covered in foaming streams of blood and saliva.

The typical chaos of the morning commute rolled off Ned's back. He was lost in his thoughts, thinking about how his life would change after meeting his doctor. A single pill. He imagined himself as a man reforged. After a lifetime of emptiness and depression, he would rise from the ashes of the old Ned, becoming

the new Ned. The best Ned.

The office Ned worked in was overrun with beige: beige carpets, walls, and furniture combined into a sprawling complex of identically colored cubicles. Under the flickering fluorescent lights, Ned made his way down an aisle of cubes to one of his very own. For ten hours a day, this was his home, his desk chair a throne, though he was far from being the king of the castle.

“Morning Ned, I need to talk to you about something.”

Beads of sweat appeared on Ned's forehead as he spun his office chair to face his boss.

“Good morning, Mr. Peters. Is there a problem?”

“Well, you see, Ned, it's come to my attention that you've been spending a lot of time in the bathroom. My sources say you go to the bathroom on average three times a day for up to 10 minutes at a shot. Is there a medical condition I should be made aware of?”

Ned's voice cracked. “No, Mr. Peters. It's just that I've been eating a lot of cheese. It's the only thing guaranteed to be at the market.”

“Look, Ned, if you worked more than the mandatory fifty hours, maybe you wouldn't have to rely on government handouts. I built this company up from nothing through hard work and a small loan from my father. I never let government dairy products slow me down!”

“I'm sorry, Mr. Peters. I'll be more aware of

my bathroom breaks.”

Mr. Peters smiled. “That’s the spirit! Keep your nose to the grindstone; it will all pay off one day.”

A few seconds after his boss left, Ned’s fingers unclamped the armrest of his chair, his heartbeat returning to normal.

“One pill,” he whispered.

The day unfolded, as it always did, with the beige-ness of the place swallowing everything. The last ten minutes of the workday slowed to a crawl as Ned’s anticipation grew. He assumed the clock was purposely working against him, trying to keep him from the cure to the dark cloud he lived under. Finally, a green light over his desk switched on, indicating the end of his shift. As columns of employees shuffled down the corridor past his cube, he deftly maneuvered through the dead-eyed crowd and to the exit.

The medical complex looked like every other building in the city, faded and crumbling. As Ned made his way up its chipped concrete steps, two men in hazmat suits passed him in the other direction. They were carrying a biohazard bag of roughly human size and shape. He almost fell off the staircase, trying to move out of their way as he entered the building.

Ned approached a receptionist’s desk, separated from the public by bulletproof glass and chicken wire. The disinterested nurse manning the station pushed a clipboard through a slot in the glass toward Ned.

“Fill this out,” she said, never making eye contact.

“Say, I just saw what looked like a body being carried out...”

The receptionist cut him off by tapping on the glass, bringing his attention to a note that read, *Please Don’t Bother Staff*.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t...”

The receptionist once again tapped the sign.

The inside of the examination room was cluttered, its walls papered in pharmaceutical ads. While waiting for his doctor’s arrival, Ned pulled a magazine from an end table. On the cover was an image of a city turned to rubble from one of the current wars. Ned flipped to the entertainment section.

Just as he was about to read the latest gossip from the hottest star, Ned’s doctor walked in. His lab coat was adorned with advertisements like a NASCAR driver. Instead of selling beer and car parts, his ads had the names of pharma corps and fancy multi-syllable chemicals. With a smile that would have been at home on a car salesman’s face, the doctor grabbed and pumped Ned’s hand.

“Hello Doctor Cosmatos.”

“Ned, it’s good to see you. So you’ve decided to try the medication?”

“Yes, Doctor Cosmatos. You said that the trials have been overwhelmingly positive. No adverse side effects or anything?”

“As I mentioned on the phone, everything has gone better than hoped. Not only have we found no side effects, but the medication is a one-time deal. Our oldest test subjects are going on three solid years of relief from their depression from *a single pill*.” He said, emphasizing the last three words.

“It’s hard to believe. My entire life, I’ve lived under the shadow of depression. A lifetime of struggle and frustration.” Ned shook his head.

“No more shadows! That’s right, Ned, this medication is next to magic. Now that the trials have concluded, you get to be on the ground floor of what will no doubt be a historic moment in medicine. You have nothing to lose... but your depression!”

Both men laughed before the good doctor

reminded Ned that their allotted five minutes were up, and he needed to vacate the room for the next poor soul in need of healing. His pill would be with the receptionist.

Back at home, Ned had changed into his pajamas early, eager to start a new day free of crippling inner pain. He stood in front of his bathroom mirror, holding a pill in one hand and a glass of water in the other. He stared at the pill; it seemed to have such weight for such a tiny thing. The little white capsule stared back silently.

He toasted himself in the mirror. "To the new me!"

Ned popped the pill, trying to dramatically wash it down by chugging the glass of water. He gagged halfway through, hosing the mirror down with jets of water from his nostrils—still, mission success. The pill had landed.

The following day, when awoken by the harsh repeating tone of his alarm clock, Ned noticed something different. There was a rhythm, beautiful in its primitiveness, to what up until now had sounded like drowning cats to him. He listened to the alarm momentarily before realizing he was nodding in unison. Enough tomfoolery; the new Ned needed to prepare for the workday!

Every great day starts with breakfast, and Ned threw open his refrigerator in that pursuit. Next to a moldy box of baking soda, the only other thing inside was a half-pound block of cheese. Normally, he'd be upset about how hard it was to afford food and how tired he was of cheese. But that was the old Ned.

The new Ned was grateful for what he had and decided to make the best of it. He took his standard slice and placed it on a plate. Then, his creativity kicked in. Rummaging into the dark recesses of his cabinets, he produced a

bottle of parsley flakes. Waving the container over the cheese slice, bits of green and cabinet dust coated it like snow. Mr. Peters was right. He wasn't going to let some government cheese slow him down! He scarfed down the meal, admiring its plastic consistency before rushing out to greet the world.

It was a magical morning, and the streets were filled with the raw drama of human existence. He looked at the noble homeless people, living life on their terms, free as the birds that once flew among the city's rooftops. Like hobbled gazelles, they roamed the majestic city, the true sons and daughters of the streets!

Among the scrappy survivors, a new drama was blossoming before him. What to old Ned would have been a pimp getting rough with one of his working girls was now seen in a more positive light. The dust-up was just a minor hiccup in the two's relationship. Although the pimp's backhanded slap may have been a tad excessive, it conveyed a positive message about the value of work. Her bruised face would heal, but the lesson would last a lifetime.

"Wat youz looking at boy?"

Ned had gotten so caught up in his observations he didn't realize he had stopped walking and was staring directly at the pimp.

"Ize said, wat are you looking at?"

The pimp walked towards Ned. In response, Ned checked over his shoulders to ensure someone else wasn't being addressed.

"Sorry to interrupt you. I was just admiring your managerial skills."

"So youz think youz some kinda smart guy? Youz think youz funny?"

Before he could answer the question, the pimp had bumped into Ned. Ned thought it a rude thing to do before he felt a trickle of liquid flow down his side. As the pimp returned to his

sobbing employee, Ned realized he had been stabbed.

“Youz stupid or something? If Ize haz to come back over there, you ain’t ever leaving herez, cheeze boy.”

Ned waved in acknowledgment, the motion making him wince in pain. A small bloodstain had blossomed on his shirt. Heeding the pimp’s advice, he continued to the train station and cursed his bad luck. His first day as new Ned, and he’s coming to work with a stained shirt.

When the mainstream religions collapsed, the vacuum that it created was like a ringing dinner bell to charlatans and the mentally ill. That’s why a masked group armed with burning incense surrounded Ned as he entered the train station. They wore bandannas printed with a cyclopean eye overlaying their real ones. While this did give the group a unique look, it also hindered their vision, as evident by the number of incense burns covering their arms. Ned tried to think of which cult they were while politely stepping out of the pungent cloud of incense smoke.

One of the members stepped in front of him. “Hello, brother Earth being. I have a very important message for you.”

Ned considered ignoring the cultist, but wouldn’t that be religious persecution? This fellow went to all the trouble to put on his bandanna and come down to the train station. The least Ned could do was listen.

After a conversation about how human souls will power the Outer Gods, bringing about a new world order, Ned decided to join the cult to avoid missing his train. Initiation was a simple affair. It involved Ned opening his wallet to fish out any currency and handing it over to the man with the festive mask. Nothing but food stamps were inside. The masked figure

flipped Ned the finger and informed him there would be no place for him among the Outer Gods. Dejected, Ned walked onto the train, trailing wisps of smoke behind him.

The comforting warmth of beige surrounded Ned as he sat down at his desk. He looked out over his desktop and smiled upon his domain. In addition to his usual morning setup, he added some first aid. Using tissues and tape, he fashioned a bandage for his wound. While dabbing at the stain on his shirt with a wet paper towel, Mr. Peters walked in.

“Mr. Peters! Good morning!” Ned said while trying to hide his blood stain under the desk.

“Ned, are you bleeding?”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Peters, I was stabbed coming into work this morning.”

“You didn’t get any blood on the carpets? We just had the cleaning crew in.”

“No, sir. I believe the bleeding stopped while on the commute here.”

“Good job.”

Mr. Peters patted Ned on the shoulder before his tone became more sober.

“You know, Ned, if I had any children, I always thought you might remind me of one of them.”

“Thank you, Mr. Peters.” Ned flushed.

“But with your rampant misuse of bathroom privileges and now hygiene issues, you’re putting me in a tight spot, Ned.”

Mr. Peters sniffed the air. “Do I smell...do I smell drugs? Ned, are you on the grass? Now, this is a bridge too far. I’m sorry, Ned, but I’m going to have to let you go.”

The color drained from Ned’s face. This wasn’t just a job; it was his identity. Or at least that’s the attitude of old Ned. New Ned was behind the wheel now.

“Mr. Peters, I’m sorry I let you down. I realize all the good things you’ve done for me. The complementary free cup of water each day. Chair privileges. All of it. As the saying goes, *when a door closes, a window opens!* I’ll be fine.”

Mr. Peters let out a rumbling laugh. “That’s the attitude, my boy! I’m sure you’ll be the CEO of your own company in no time.” Then Mr. Peterson spoke seriously, “Just don’t become a competitor.”

The two men laughed, bonding over Mr. Peters’ witticism.

“Well, Ned, I guess this is goodbye.” Mr. Peters looked at his watch. “Looks like my allotted five-minute firing time is up. I guess you best be on your way before security arrives.”

“I guess you’re right, Mr. Peters. Goodbye, Mr. Peters. I love you,” he said, gathering up his personal possessions.

New Ned could feel old Ned creeping up on the journey back home. His food stamps wouldn’t last long without a proof of work badge. With so few jobs available, would he even be able to find a new one before starvation set in?

Being as how his workday ended prematurely, Ned decided to walk home in an attempt to get old Ned off his back. Taking a route he hadn’t used for years, Ned was amazed by how far the homeless encampments had spread. Ingenious acts of engineering covered every square inch of sidewalk. Cardboard boxes reinforced with duct tape, pup tents connected by plastic sheet tunnels, and shopping carts tricked out like something from a Mad Max film. He studied the structures in case he needed to construct one himself.

Carefully making his way through excrement and used needles, Ned saw something extraordinary. Something so beautiful that it

ass-kicked old Ned to the side and let new Ned back in control. There, amid squalor, a building rose Christ-like, offering hope to all. A neon sign blazed a simple message: Permanent Happiness.

Ned wagered that the pharmacorps must have high hopes for their new drug to have a store dedicated solely to its proliferation. A queue of broken people lined up at the entrance, their sour lives about to be made delicious. He was happy for them, happy for the world.

With a new pep in his step, Ned strutted home. He noticed that there were ads everywhere for the medication. He passed billboards with smiling kittens, trash cans with delightful octogenarians, and flyers showing sea turtles kissing. All were trumpeting to the world the arrival of a miracle, all emblazoned with the same message: Permanent Happiness. It was then that Ned knew with complete certainty that everything would be fine. ❖

“THE RIDER”

by J. J. PORET

Jude sits on his couch trying to get the TV to work when the doorbell rings. He shakes his head, then mashes the Volume-Up button on the remote. The ancient RCA sitting on the TV stand remains audibly stubborn, while pixelated frames of the evening news flicker across the screen.

“Brokaw’s an idiot anyway,” Jude mumbles to the TV, to the empty room.

The doorbell rings again, forcing Jude into a decision he doesn’t like but that he has already made. He stands slowly, head hurting from too much wine the night before, and lets the incandescent light of the room wash the dullness from his eyes and limbs. He shouldn’t drink wine, he tells himself, and empties the dregs of a warm sixteen-ounce beer into his mouth. He swallows and the liquid is just enough go-go juice to get him moving.

He looks out the darkness in the window of the kitchen and decides it can’t be the mailman. It is too late and too dark for mail. Besides, no one sends mail these days. It’s all emails and texts now. Not that Jude gets any of these either. Not anymore. He tosses the empty can in the trash as he makes his way down the narrow, dim hallway of his one-bedroom apartment and stops short of the door.

Jude stands there, like a gambler waiting for a dealer to flip over the next card on a pair of split aces. Like hedging this bet for a few moments will keep it from being a bad one.

“Wait a second,” he says to the door, because maybe he is busy. Maybe he is just finishing making the sexy time with his girlfriend. Maybe he is finishing a call with his financial advisor. People don’t need to know everything. He waits for a long moment, wishing his door had a peephole. He tucks in the front of his shirt and then in his deepest, police-procedural voice says, “Hello.”

“Mr. Johnson?” a tinny male voice carries through the door. Jude waits, again like he is hedging a bet, but clenches a hand on the door-knob.

“Yeah,” Jude says.

“I hate to bother at such an hour,” the voice says, “but we have urgent business.”

Jude lets his eyes relax and looks at the door; a game he used to play as a child, like this un-focusing gave him the power to see through things.

“I bet,” Jude mumbles, sliding the security chain back. Because upping the ante is always more interesting than folding.

And it isn’t the mailman at the door. The guy standing in front of Jude is holding a briefcase and looks like every accountant Jude has ever seen.

“Yes, yes,” the man says and skirts past Jude, entering the hallway.

“What the...” Jude blurts, but the man lifts his hand in the air, dismissing him.

The accountant, he walks in, then turns to

face Jude.

“My apologies,” the man says and hands Jude a business card. Jude doesn’t look at the card, palms it instead.

“What are you doing?” Jude asks, as the man turns to survey Jude’s apartment, coat over his arm like an absurd waiter.

“Just paperwork. Administrative, really.” The man turns and grins while tapping the front of his briefcase with his fingers. “My name is Aldous Baxter. It’s on the card.”

Jude looks at the card he still has cradled in his hand and reads: *Aldous Baxter, Insurance*. He flips the card, and the other side is blank.

“I really am quite busy,” Jude says and fixes his eyes on Aldous Baxter. He can muster enough confidence to will the man out of his apartment. If that doesn’t work, he might try to throw him out. But the man’s gray eyes are mirrors, with lines that seem to fold in his own amusement.

“I only require a minute of your time, Mr. Johnson,” he says, “It appears there is a small issue with an insurance policy.” The man lifts his briefcase and gestures towards the table in the kitchen. “Shall we?”

The headache from last night’s wine forces Jude to close his eyes and he uses his thumb and ring finger to massage his temples. “What policy?” he asks.

“Let us see,” the man says, already sitting at the table, fumbling with the clasps of his briefcase. Jude walks to the table but doesn’t sit down, only because standing helps with the pain in the side of his head. He feels his body sway, like you do after your sixth, maybe seventh, beer of the evening. That alarm clock in your head that flashes the score, pushing a decision to either open another one or call it a night. Jude looks at his icebox, does the math.

The man is rummaging inside his briefcase, lifting documents up into the light, examining them. Sitting down, the man looks even smaller than he did standing in the doorway. He is wearing a white short-sleeve button down with impeccably pressed trousers. Definitely an accountant’s uniform, Jude thinks. But aren’t insurance salesmen just accountants who trade in risk? Gambling house money, laying odds against the horrible things in life like car accidents and melanomas?

“Mr. Johnson,” he says without looking up from a creased and tattered paper, “you worked for Gulf Coast Paper Company from...1993 to 2004. Is this correct?”

Jude looks at the ceiling, like he is remembering, but he doesn’t have to think about the dates. He shrugs and says, “Yeah, that sounds right. I was a foreman. Nightshift, mostly.”

The man laughs and holds up the document in triumph. “Yes, yes. This is it.” He looks at Jude still standing in the kitchen and motions for him to sit. And why not, Jude thinks, let’s look at the cards being dealt.

“This document states that you and a Betty Johnson acquired this policy in October of 1995. Your wife I assume? Betty, I mean.”

“Yes. Well, no. Divorced,” Jude says and looks back at the refrigerator. How many tallboys are left from the twelve-pack he bought at the Pack-And-Save earlier that morning? Was it really six? “We divorced several years ago.”

“I am sorry to hear that,” the man says.

“I’m not,” Jude says and then wonders if he should have said that out loud.

“No matter,” the man says as he turns over one of the pages in his hands and points a manicured finger to the bottom section of the form. “Says here the sole beneficiary is one Marcy Johnson,” and he taps the paper for emphasis.

Jude looks down at the paper and sees his only daughter's name typed faintly on the page. The document itself is old and looks like a photocopy of a photocopy. "I'm sorry...Mr. Baxter is it?"

"Call me Aldous," he says.

"Aldous, you see, I really am quite busy. And I don't know how I can help you. I don't remember a life insurance policy at Gulf Coast. And any policy I did have would have run out a long time ago."

"Ah," Aldous exclaims, "but that is the beauty of a whole life policy. You – and your employer – paid a premium for over a decade, and when you left, the policy continued to pay for itself with the accumulated cash value of the account." Aldous lowers the paper he is holding, peers over it.

Jude fixes his eyes on the man, returns his stare, like confidence is the same as understanding or knowledge. "I know how insurance works."

"Great," Aldous says, shuffling through more papers in his briefcase. The movement stirs the air in the kitchen and there is a faint smell of mold or mildew. No, not mildew at all, but ~ rot? Like the decay of a fallen tree in a swamp.

"The issue we have is this," Aldous says, sliding a single page across the laminate of the table. Jude picks it up, looks at it. It is another photocopy of a photocopy, but this one appears to have been created with carbon paper or even a mimeograph. He angles the document, turns it slightly and squints.

"What is this?" Jude asks.

"It is an insurance rider, Mr. Johnson," Aldous says. "Optional coverage that adds certain... benefits. To your original policy." He reaches over the table, turns the paper to face him and

jabs his finger down in the middle of the document. "You can see here that you initiated this specific coverage."

Again, Jude squints and tries to make sense of the blurred letters on the page. He shrugs and says, "Yeah, you're going to have to help me."

The man across the table is patient. He looks past Jude at the darkness of the window, then leans in, like this is the payoff. Like he is flipping the final card. "This is an opportunity," he says.

"Opportunity," Jude repeats and leans back into his chair. The word seems foreign, like a language forgotten in childhood. "For what?" he finally asks.

"For you, and your daughter, Mr. Johnson."

The ache in Jude's temples has settled behind his eyes, but now it is a familiar pain. Something he knows, he can hold on to.

"Riders like these are a bit unusual. Sometimes referred to as niche policies in our business," Aldous says, picking up the paper as if to recite from it. "But we buy insurance for all sorts of reasons, correct Mr. Johnson?"

Jude studies the man holding the paper, tries to read him. If Aldous has a tell, Jude can't find it. But that word is in his head again, opportunity.

"Your standard whole life policy covers normal realities," Aldous continues. "Get run over by a car? Check. Say that mole on your back starts looking more like a silhouette of Abe Lincoln. Check. Get gunned down by an extremist with an agenda in the supermarket? This policy has you covered, you see?"

Jude squirms in his chair. He doesn't see, and the throbbing has moved from his eyes to his chest. His vision has started to swim a bit, the blurry edges of his kitchen dance in and out

of focus. He concentrates on the paper in front of him, willing his attention through the haze.

Aldous studies Jude's face, like he checking to see if Jude is following, then says, "But most importantly for you, Mr. Johnson, it covers stomach cancer."

"What are you talking about?" Jude feels his face fill with heat, an anger he didn't know he still had in him.

"I assure you," Aldous says, his eyes void of emotion, "my company is in the insurance business and not the medical business. I deal in probabilities and numbers, not faith and miracles. But because of this, I can tell you that the outcome is not a matter of if, but when."

"But I -"

"No, you cannot Mr. Johnson," Aldous says, "but that doesn't mean you don't have a choice." Aldous places the paper back on the table, turns it to face Jude. As Jude looks at the document again, he feels it. Under his ribcage, like a worm burrowing in the center of his gut. He places his hand instinctively over his side,

like a healer trying to draw the negative energy from his body.

"How ..." Jude starts, then looks back at Aldous.

"I don't need your medical reports to tell you are in quite a pickle, Mr. Johnson," Aldous says. "But I can retrieve it, if needed. Your medical report that is."

Jude shoulders draw in. "You don't have anything I need to see."

"Again, I am not a doctor. I deal in probabilities," he says and points back at the paper on the table. "The good news is that this rider, the one you acknowledged in your original policy, offers a potential option."

Jude's eyebrows raise and he blinks in the way that simultaneously indicates both interest and doubt.

"Upon the verified Abduction Phenomenon of the Designated Life insured," Aldous begins reading, "Company will pay double Death Benefit to the Beneficiary subject to the terms and provisions of this policy."



“Abduction Phenomenon?” Jude asks.

“Yes,” Aldous says, “and don’t worry so much about the verification. Your daughter will only need to provide proof that you are gone.” He chuckles, as if someone has whispered an inside joke, then adds, “We once had a family submit a black polaroid, which we of course initially rejected.”

Still smiling, Aldous adds, “Do you know what their reply was?”

Jude stares at him, no response.

“They said it was dark in the UFO!” Aldous laughs hard this time and shakes his head in disbelief. “We approved the final claim. On principle.”

“You talking about what...aliens?”

Aldous stops laughing and pulls a heavy envelope from his briefcase, places it on the table. “The word alien has such a negative connotation these days, Mr. Johnson. So foreign, de-humanizing almost.”

“But aliens aren’t human,” Jude says, his mind twitching. What he knows about aliens comes from supermarket tabloids and late-night movies. Small gray things, with black, protruding eyes.

“You shouldn’t believe everything you see on TV, Mr. Johnson.”

Jude feels the movement again, under his ribs. How big are aliens? Can they shrink down and enter your organs? Use lasers to scar up your liver, bloat your stomach and cause the red patches he has on his arms?

“The original policy cash value, payable at the time of death, is \$150,000. However, the amount is doubled if the abduction rider is accepted.”

Jude does the math in his head, then tries to perform another equation. One where he doesn’t have all the variables.

In a single movement, Aldous stands and points to the refrigerator. “May I?”

Jude only nods, watches as Aldous opens the ice box and pulls a single beer from the packaging. He opens the can and places it in front of Jude.

Jude reaches for the beer, first with one hand, then he cradles it with two. “How much time do I have?”

“The cash value in your policy will keep it active for another eighteen months,” Aldous says, then looks up at the ceiling as though he were doing his own calculations. “But you won’t need nearly that long. I’d say there is a 98% probability that Marcy will collect the whole life benefit before then.”

“And all I have to do is agree to this.... this abduction?” Jude squints his eyes as he says this, like the wrinkles in his brow are the only part of him still capable of disbelief.

“We’ll need a deposit, of course.”

“And Marcy will receive the \$300,000?”

“Upon verification of your abduction. The deposit is just a formality.”

Jude takes this in. He notices his leg bouncing quickly on the ball of his foot, a nervous tic he’s had since grade school. He takes a pull from the beer and looks at the man across the table from him again, looking for a sign. A tell.

“Can I see the policy?” Jude says and holds out his hand.

“Well, yes. But first there is the matter of a deposit.”

“I thought you said the policy was paid already. By the existing cash value and all.”

“Correct, but that is for the standard policy. The rider is different. My employer used to combine these, but when we came to special situations – such as your Mr. Johnson – Management determined that it was important to

charge for renewal. If we don't, customers don't feel like they are getting value. There must be a transaction."

Jude looks at the man, then his suitcase, then the heavy envelope on the table. If this was a poker table, he felt his time was running short.

"How much?" Jude asks.

"Your pound of flesh, Mr. Johnson," Aldous says, and points towards Jude's distended stomach. "Again, standard policy."

"You want to take my stomach?" Jude asks.

"No, no. You can't live without a stomach," Aldous says. "A lesser organ."

Jude feels a tingling inside his torso, again a sensation like there was construction work being done on his insides. He sits up in his chair. He looks at his beer sitting on the table and needs a sip. In fact, he never needed a drink more.

"You're going to cut me open and take my kidney?" Jude's body twisted, like he was trying to distance his organs from the man sitting across from him.

"It is already done, Mr. Johnson," Aldous says, then lifts up his closed briefcase, pats it on the side as if he is confirming a deal complete.

Jude lifts his beer, sips on it slowly. The cold amber liquid is now a lubricant he needs to keep his mind straight. Brain juice, he rationalizes, and when he looks down, he notices his leg is shaking again.

"So, my daughter..." Jude starts.

"Will be paid in full," Aldous finishes, "upon submitting proof of death or abduction. Whichever comes first." He then slides the heavy envelope to Jude.

"You should read all of this. Especially, as they say, the fine print."

Aldous stands then turns toward the door.

Over his shoulder, he says, "I believe our business is done here, Mr. Johnson. I'll show myself out."

Jude watches as Aldous shuffles across the kitchen. As the man places his hand on the doorknob, Jude finds the strength to ask, "Mr. Baxter, what do they look like?"

"Who, Mr. Johnson?"

"The aliens," he replies.

Aldous places one arm into his coat then the other, then rolls his shoulders to finish putting on his heavy coat. "I believe it was Hume who said that if triangles had a God, He would have three sides."

Jude nods as if this as good an answer as any. He still doesn't get up from the table, instead he stares out the window of his kitchen. He hears the door open and then latch as it closes behind the insurance salesman.

Jude returns to the chair in his living room, picks up the remote, then drops it back on the recliner. Relaxing his eyes until they are unfocused, Jude tries to look through the envelope he is still holding. That old trick he used to try as a kid still isn't working.

He tosses the envelope on the floor then with a shaking hand, Jude lifts his shirt and traces the thin white scar that is now prominently across his stomach. A scar that wasn't there this morning. He thinks about his daughter, and what she might do with the money. Then he reclines in his chair and wonders how long he can live without kidneys. He wonders if it will be long enough for the rider to kick in. ❖

“THE GOLEM”

by GARY DUEHR

There is a dead thing in the house, thinks Edie. I can smell its rotting carcass, a sweet stink like meat gone bad, but I don't know where the dead thing is. I've tied up the kitchen bag and dragged it out to the bin in the side yard, where ferns are sprouting chest high in the sweltering July heat wave. I hate AC so I've been leaving the windows open, but now I've had to shut them tight against the invasion of big black flies, I can't tell if they're coming from inside or outside. They buzz through the house like dive bombers, I find them floating in my coffee or clumped in the sudsy drain of the sink. This morning I thwacked a dozen of them with a fat red oven glove against the front bay window, kneeling on the loveseat. Anybody walking by would think I'd lost it but let them; I'm already a castoff because my husband Jared dropped dead two years ago at 49 from an aneurism, and I'm too young to be a widow living by herself. Even my United Methodist book group has stopped calling or coming by, their sympathy slowed then ceased like a dripping faucet, and I've always kept my distance from the card store where I work part-time.

This town's too small as it is. I tried a widow's group down the lake but it was all old ladies. And the county's too sparse for online dating. I'm not ready to move on, as they say. I like it where I am. If there's something I can't figure out like the furnace, I can always call my daughter Kiki in college in Berkeley. I'm de-

termined not to bother anyone with the dead thing or the flies, the last time anything like this happened Jared found a shriveled rat corpse, swarming with fly larvae, in Kiki's old bedroom closet upstairs, and he managed to scoop it up with a plastic bag and dump it in the trash. This time I'm going to do it myself—I've sniffed through all the closets upstairs and shone a flashlight into the basement's dark recesses stuffed with Christmas ornaments and exercise equipment. But watching TV or working in the kitchen, I can still smell the sickly odor, and I hope it's not a dead rat or squirrel that the heat has activated.

That night Edie dreamt that a wall in the kitchen had swollen up like a bruise or pregnant belly. A seam in the wall had split and the stench like a putrid abscess was overwhelming. She had to hold a wet washcloth over her nose as she bent down to pry the opening apart with a claw hammer; inside the wall she could make out a bumpy shape wrapped in black plastic. In the dream she immediately thought of the body bag with which the ambulance crew had trundled her dead husband out the front door. She'd had to run to the bathroom and throw up when the zipper clacked shut over his face. That's the last time he'll ever be here with me, she wailed to herself.

On her knees in the kitchen, Edie became convinced that Jared was there in the wall, still

alive and barely breathing inside the plastic, and she had to dig him out. She tore at the wall with her bare hands, clumps of horsehair plaster falling down; she gripped the lath and broke the wood strips apart, tugging until what looked like a shoulder had half erupted from the gouged-out wall, and she woke up clutching Jared's pillow beside her.

Early the next morning Edie heads straight for the kitchen, she's still half asleep as she plods down the stairs and stops dead in the doorway: there's a protrusion at the base of the wall by the fridge, the paneling starting to split apart from the heat like it does every summer. She can hear a chorus of buzzing coming from inside like a plane flying low; she's scared of what she might find and presses one hand to the swollen place, a vibration thrumming in her palm. She goes to the mudroom and puts on a winter coat and Jared's welding helmet hanging from a hook, then slips on the big red oven gloves. She feels ready. She grips a spatula and pokes at the paneling, peeling it apart; there's a gasp of decay, and a few flies spill out. She tumbles backward, surprised, and kicks a hole in the wall. Inside she spies a chalky gray mound like the wasp nest they found in the garage a few years ago, only this one is huge, half as big as her, teeming with diaphanous wings. She throws open the back door and grabs a broom to beat at the mass. A torrent of flies spirals to the ceiling like a tornado's funnel then barrels out the door. Edie crumples to the floor in a fetal position, shielding her face, trembling, and she imagines their flight like a horde of black ravens darkening the sky with their enormous bristly wings.

"Kiki, you there?" asks Edie into her cell-

phone that afternoon, sitting on the front porch swing. "This is Mom, give me call when you can, nothing urgent but I need to—"

Kiki picks up with a click and says, "What is it Mom, I just got back from Econ."

"Hi, I just wanted to see how you're doing."

"I'm fine, thanks for the check you sent last week."

"Oh sure, you let me know when you need any help."

"You ok, Mom?, you sound kinda shaky."

"I'm fine, just missing your Dad, I had a dream about him again last night."

"I know, I have them too."

"Oh sweetheart, I hate to bother you."

"You're not, Mom, anytime."

"It's just that I can feel him near me."

"I know what you mean, I miss him too."

"No honey, it's more than that. I mean I can feel him here with me, in our house on Fayette."

"I don't understand."

"I know, it's hard for me to wrap my mind around it too." Edie starts to tear up, the sun hot on her legs, and she puts her feet down to stop the swing.

"Mom?"

"I'll call you later, hon, I gotta go," and she thumbs the phone's red button.

On the patio, Edie has arranged the plaid shirt and jeans she carried down from Jared's closet on the lounge next to hers. She was careful to cover up the big grayish lump she has fashioned into the rough shape of a torso with stubs of limbs and a knobby head. It has dried out in the sun for a few days but still has an earthy smell like ear wax. She thought she could feel fresh hairs starting to prickle on its extremities.

Above the collar she rests the white straw hat he bought in Little Cuba in Miami a couple years ago. "It's hot today, I thought you'd like a little shade."

She lies back and takes a sip from a mojito on the table between them. Little bits of mint stick in her teeth.

She gestures to his drink, a straw poking through its ice cubes. "Let me know if you like yours. Better drink up before the ice melts."

She reaches for the radio on the table and twists the knob on. "Hotel California" oozes out: "And still those voices are calling from far away; wake you up in the middle of the night just to hear them say."

"Fucking Eagles," says Edie, one of their favorite lines from *The Big Lebowski*. "Right, hon?" she grins to the lounge beside her, tipping her glass in his direction. ❖



“DYING TO LIVE”

by ALEXANDRA BALASA

The first time Lyssa accessed the Artificial Iteration’s operating system, it was by accident. She’d only been trying to break into her school’s Examination Office (her history essays had to be salvaged before final papers were transferred to the Board of Education for grading). Overriding the access code on the door’s keypad should’ve been no issue for someone whose cracking skills had gotten her sent to Toronto’s only private school for information technology. But halfway through the break-in, voices sounded down the hall. Lyssa swiveled, cursing under her breath when she found no coverage in the hallway. What was the penalty for cheating on examinations? Expulsion?

Then, through the surge of panic, she saw it: a grid-like mesh settling over everything, as if someone had dropped finely-woven spidersilk over her eyes. She blinked, hard, but the grid only became clearer. It was there no matter where she looked. And then numbers, a cloud of ones and zeros. Everything, *everything*, was made of these ones and zeros, as if Lyssa could see the elemental underpinnings, the building blocks, of existence in the AI. Except existence was made of numbers instead of protons, neutrons, and electrons. Numbers instead of genetic code. No: the numbers *were* the genetic code. Somehow, Lyssa felt the truth of that. She felt the numbers’ systematic arrangement, their deliberateness, in her very bones.

Before she could make sense of it, the two

men she’d heard approaching rounded the corner. They picked up their pace, striding towards her and yelling warnings that came out all binary code. Then her consciousness transcended the scene; she was looking down on it from some external and elevated plane. It was surreal, a sense of being both inside and outside – not just her body, but this plane of existence. Lyssa’s mind flailed, and without knowing how, the part of her that was outside *clicked* on the two men. They froze in time as a menu popped up, offering her a variety of choices: 1) AI temporal modifications, 2) avatar neurochemistry, 3) modification of surroundings, 4) narrative reconstruction, 5) send to recycling bin. Each option made dozens of new menus blossom before her, the commands so intricate that her brain processed only her own alarm.

She sent them to the recycling bin. They disappeared.

#

Soon after the incident outside the Examination Office, Lyssa returned from lessons to find a stranger inspecting the oil painting of a stormy sea hanging over her bed in her dorm room. When he turned, his faded eyes appraised her as if she, too, were a painting prone to his judgment. The stiff smirk that followed said he did not deem her a work of art.

“I expected you to be older,” he said, a Scottish lilt to his words, “after what you’ve done.”

Lyssa had certainly not expected *him* to be

older – not that she'd expected him at all – but he was by far the oldest person she'd ever seen. White hair combed in a side partition, a white mustache that hid his upper lip, and a frame like an ancient but sturdy willow. Liver-spotted hands were folded atop an opal-headed walking stick, and the crinkles around his eyes were trenches armies could shelter in.

"Close your gaping maw, lass, in the True Iteration my seventy-five years would hardly scratch the surface of 'old.'"

Seventy-five! That would put him in the Seventh Tier. The lowest-class person she'd ever encountered had been a slave of the Fifth at her school. Students shared an unspoken rumor that the fifty-seven-year-old woman had given up all upgrade opportunities to care for her paraplegic son.

Then the old man's words registered. After what she'd done? A wave of fear launched through her: he knew about her accident. But if he really was of the Seventh, he was a slave of the lowest order. What leverage could he have over her? Lyssa lifted her chin and crossed her arms. "You can't talk to me like that. I'm twelve years old and of the First Tier. Who's your master?"

The man's hands tightened around his cane's opal knob. Lyssa couldn't help wilting under his gaze, under those faded but startlingly lucid blue eyes. With a gut-twisting feeling she began to understand her mistake. How did a slave get into her locked room unseen? How did a slave come to own a silken vest and a bejeweled cane?

Lyssa turned and bolted for her door. It slammed shut inches from her nose. She skidded to a halt, spinning to face the old Scot. Her crashing heartbeat left her lightheaded, nauseous, but she pushed everything aside save for

the anger that kept her anchored. "If you try to do anything, I'll scream. The hall monitors will come and you'll be arrested."

"Nobody will hear you, lass. I've accessed the neural codes of everyone on this floor – nobody is approaching. In addition, I've disabled sound for the entire corridor. Unlike some of us, I don't make a habit of *deleting* inconvenient people. You should thank your lucky stars I found you before the Operators noticed the system error."

His words washed over her and she floundered to put them together. "The...what system – ?"

"At worst my training will prevent you from wreaking havoc on the AI and having the Operators delete your code from the interface faster than you can blink. At best, it will reshape reality as we know it."

"I don't – "

"Your Tier and mine are no longer relevant. You will defer to me in all situations. You will only access the operating system under my supervision until I say you're ready. Understand?"

"No!" Lyssa cried. That was the problem. The lack of understanding, of control, left her feeling like a hound yanking at its chains. Her instructors called it insubordination, said it came from growing up without parents. But she knew that wasn't it. "Am I an Operator?" Her heart fluttered with equal measures of fear, anger, and excitement. Because deep down she knew the answer. Who else could do what she'd done, save the creators of the AI themselves? Reality had become a simulation and she'd been outside of it, able to shape and control it. An Operator.

"Oh, aye," the Scot said, and excitement spiked through her, "we will definitely have to take care of that pesky arrogance."

“That’s not an answer, you’re just distracting – !”

“Not *once*,” he said, and the way he hissed the last word made Lyssa’s protests shrivel in her throat, “have you asked what became of the men you deleted.”

She blinked, heat flushing her face. “I...I just thought...it’s not like they were *real*.” Nothing in the AI was.

The Scot cocked his head, looking at her with such pity that anger clenched her stomach again. “If I were to slap you, you’d feel pain. Would saying that you’re not ‘real’ take your pain away?” She refused him the satisfaction of an answer, and he sighed. “Fortunately, you did not clear the recycling bin. I can retrieve them, code memories for them to explain their absences.”

“You can change the AI’s code. You...you’re like me.” *An Operator.*

The man’s face puckered in response. “In time, I will teach you to hone your skills and hide your interference with the system from the Operators. Your lessons begin immediately. Speak to nobody of this – your training, or my existence.”

“Why do you want to help me? Who even are you?”

For the first time, that white mustache twitched into a smile. “It’s you who will help me. Help me save the AI. You may call me Graeme; I am the last of the Codebreakers.”

#

Recording 1 of 182

If you are receiving this message, I offer you both my congratulations and condolences. Congratulations for discovering the abilities which mark you as a fellow Codebreaker. Condolences for these same abilities, which condemn you to a lifetime hunted by the Operators. You must be

confused, fearful. Perhaps you are receiving this message hundreds of years after my death, and you have never even heard of the Codebreakers. I will try to offer as comprehensive an overview as possible. First off, know that I’ve arranged for time to freeze in the AI when you play these recordings. Currently the AI is paused; nobody can hear this message save you. You can play my recordings anytime you access the AI’s operating system. I will teach you how to access the system at will, but first, we must cover some history.

I need you to understand that the first and most important bug in the operating system occurred when the AI’s inhabitants became sentient. Not sentient in the conventional sense, as we were always aware of ourselves and our surrounding world. In the AI, true sentience meant becoming aware of reality’s unreality. Recognizing the observable universe as an operating system run by individuals in another plane of existence. Most of the AI’s inhabitants choose (or at least they did, in my time) to believe that that plane of existence is reality. After all, nobody likes to think their world is a derivative of a derivative. This is why we termed that plane the True Iteration, and ours the Artificial.

Sentience occurred when a few individuals, for reasons unknown, found they could access the operating system. These were the first Codebreakers. Eventually, the brightest among them learned to manipulate the system, even managing to contact the Operators themselves. They learned why the AI had been created. They learned that infertility in the TI had left worlds without enough skilled workers to keep human society, spread out through dozens of solar systems, functioning. Cloning human bodies was simple; the problem was investing the time and money it would take to raise a new generation of clones and train them in the desperately-un-

dermanned fields. So the Operators, leading coding specialists in the TI, created a virtual reality program to harvest computerized human minds. In the AI, avatars could be raised and trained in virtually no time. With the fast-forward function, a lifetime in the simulator could correspond to a few months in the real world. When the avatar is deemed a skilled, competent rendition of humanity, the Operators eject its code from the simulation and implant it into a dormant adult clone in the TI. This is why we must die in the artificial world to live in the real.

For the AI's inhabitants, this knowledge was proof of an afterlife – no, proof of a real life. It was information the first Codebreakers thought needed to be shared. They coded an inherent understanding of reality's unreality into every man, woman, and child in the AI. From then on, the AI's inhabitants fought to get ahead in the game to reach reality. The Operators, alerted of the sentience bug in their simulation, worried their self-governing avatars would try to cheat the system to make the upgrade to the TI.

Cheat they did.

#

"I have a special task for you," Graeme said one afternoon, three years into Lyssa's apprenticeship. He'd summoned her to his Burlington estate near the intersection of Lakeshore and Guelph Line. Getting here took a good hour on the GO Train, but Graeme wouldn't hear of relocating his base near her academy in Toronto. Too noisy, he said. Burlington's suburbs were closer to his native Dunfermline.

Everything within and around Graeme's estate was encrypted so masterfully that it was invisible to the operating system. From the outside it appeared a private lakeside park, perpetually abandoned. But when Lyssa refocused her

eyes to access the operating system, she could open its file and type in the access code Graeme had given her to reveal an elegant neoClassical manor. She found her mentor sipping his usual Blair Athol single-malt on the front porch. A meter and a half of snow blanketed the January streets, but the grounds around Graeme's base were always kept the moderate temperature of a Highland summer.

"What is it?" Lyssa rocked on the balls of her feet, intrigued and wary in equal measure. One day, Graeme might ask her to rob a wealthy businessman without being caught, and the next to change the migration pattern of some whales off a distant coastline. Always difficult, always arbitrary. Said it was to teach her patience. Really it was to chisel away at that 'pesky arrogance' he'd been complaining about for three years. "Can it please be something important? If you don't teach me to do all the cool revolutionary stuff you do, who will fight against the Operators' tyranny when you're gone? You're not getting any younger."

Graeme smiled his tight-lipped smile. Gallows humor: his favorite. "This so-called 'cool revolutionary stuff' I do is why I am compelled to hide my existence. A creation playing creator? Precisely why the Operators placed their restrictions on the AI in the first place, why they eliminated the Codebreakers. Reveal yourself to them, use your abilities recklessly enough to draw their attention, and you will be erased from the operating system like the men and women who opened our eyes to our own artificiality. We cannot let them know any Codebreakers remain."

"I can hide from them. Like you do."

Graeme shook his sleek, snowy-haired head. "Before I found you, I spoke to no one for three decades. It is a solitary existence, lass. What I

do is not a privilege, but a sacrifice.”

Lyssa reached into the operating system and a glass of whisky to match Graeme’s appeared in her hand. His face puckered – she was only meant to code what he said, when he said it, but in the protection of his encrypted bubble she didn’t risk exposing herself to the Operators. “When I get upgraded to the TI, I’ll become an Operator and remove the age parameters for upgrades. I’ll save you. All you have to do is live long enough to see me upgraded, you old fossil.” She smirked, but her lighthearted tone didn’t reach her heart.

Graeme swirled the ice cubes in his drink. “I do not need saving, but you’re right about one thing. You will remove the leash on the AI’s inhabitants. Now, your task?”

“It’s not important, then?” Lyssa felt petulant saying it, but her fear for Graeme translated into anger and stubbornness, as fear always did for her. He talked as if it was inevitable for him to die here, in the AI. To die for real. Not on Lyssa’s watch.

“It’s important to me.”

The earnestness in his voice shattered her anger like glass. “Anything. Tell me.”

He led her to a back office that, upon first glance, Lyssa thought was empty. Then she noticed the boy huddled in the corner. He sat with his knees tucked to his chest, rocking back and forth.

“This,” Graeme said, extending a hand, “is my grandson, Hamish.”

Hamish looked maybe one or two years younger than Lyssa. His lanky, sand-coloured hair curtained his face, and his eyes were so deep-set his brows cast shadows over them. He didn’t seem to register anyone, absorbed in arranging and rearranging a handful of pens on the floor.

“What’s wrong with him?” Lyssa asked.

“When I realized I was a Codebreaker, I left my daughter behind so the Operators could never use her against me. I coded false memories for her – something about my suicide. Until recently, I didn’t have the strength to return and see her. Hamish does not socialize, does not interact with the world at all on most days. He will never be upgraded into the TI. His family believes he is merely a test for my daughter, bestowed upon her by the Operators. I couldn’t tolerate that.”

“So you kidnapped him? Graeme! You’re not supposed to interact with the AI – the Operators could trace his disappearance back to you.” The Operators had been hunting Graeme since they’d identified him as a Codebreaker. He remained ahead of them by constantly moving and encrypting his own files, installing viruses so they’d be too busy patching the system to search for him. A game of hide-and-seek.

“Hamish was bait for me. Yet I took the cheese from the mousetrap. I’m still here, am I not? They didn’t find me.”

“I can’t believe you risked yourself like that. Operators! For what? This kid’s not even- ”

“Lyssa.”

She waved the warning away with a flick of her hand. “Well he’s *not*. And before you say it, I know we’re not real, either, but we will be. One day. This kid? Even if I upgrade him when I become an Operator, he’ll still be...like this.”

In the corner, Hamish continued rearranging pens. He ran a hand over his formation as if it displeased him, then made the same one again. Lyssa drained her scotch and grimaced, a shiver raking through her body. Rum. Damn. Her coding had been off. *Well, could’ve been piss.*

“That’s precisely what I need you for. Fix him. When you code Hamish into a fully-func-

tional human being, someone who might have a chance of being upgraded into the TI, I will deem you ready.”

Ready. For her *upgrade*? Excitement fluttered in Lyssa’s chest. She’d known Graeme would have to facilitate her upgrade while she was still young enough to be of the First Tier, but the cut-off age was twenty-five. She was only fifteen. This would be sooner than expected. She’d fix the boy in no time.

Lyssa set her jaw. “If that’s what it’ll take to gain your confidence, alright. I won’t fail you.”

Graeme cupped her cheek in his wrinkled palm, but it was Hamish he looked at with tenderness, and that twisted her insides. “I did not give you the option of failure, lass.”

#

Recording 13 of 182

Bad things happen to a society that not only stops fearing death, but starts yearning for it. Given the information acquired by the Codebreakers, the AI’s inhabitants learned that death in the AI before the age of twenty-five meant being selected by the Operators for upgrade into the TI. Suicide became the leading cause of death for the AI’s youthful population. The TI was thought better in the way that visiting an exotic location is better than reading about it.

When we know we are dreaming, we try to wake ourselves up.

The suicide epidemic alerted the Operators to their operating system’s sentience. They decommissioned all clones whose minds had been upgraded into the TI as a result of suicide in the AI. They installed programs to find and eliminate Codebreakers. They would not tolerate their creations taking charge of their own fates. Information from the AI would get transferred into a body in the TI only when, and if, the Operators deemed it ready. Yet they

didn’t know how to fix the bug of sentience in the AI’s coding. Neither would they take away the avatars’ free will, for they were training to be fully-functioning, autonomous individuals in the TI.

The Operators tried to patch the system with a series of new codes. Suicide, euthanasia, and murder would result in automatic deletion of all parties involved from the interface: death. The only way to be upgraded was to be approved by the Operators. If, for whatever reason, the way in which you conduct your life doesn’t meet the Operators’ approval (and over ninety-five percent of lives don’t), you live and age and upon your death you are deleted from the operating system without being reborn in the TI. Those upgraded younger are placed higher on the TI’s societal rungs. The older you grow in the AI, the more your prospects for wealth and prestige in the TI dwindle.

The establishment of a caste system based on age is, I trust you understand, no surprise.

#

The rift with Hamish started in Lyssa’s university years. She was tuning out Dr. Ghallager’s monotone, chewing the inside of her cheek as she leaned back in her seat in the massive lecture auditorium at Convocation Hall.

CAN’T STOP SEEING THAT BIT OF FOOD IN GHALLAGER’S BEARD, she coded into Hamish’s auditory cortex. When she didn’t sense any amusement from him, she cast out another signal. WHAT DO YOU THINK IT IS? EGG? OPERATORS, SHOULD I OFFER HIM A NAPKIN?

Hamish was staring at his interlocked hands on his lap, his expression vacant. Lyssa probed into his amygdala and found annoyance, resentment. Towards *her*? She swiveled in her seat to frown at him. He was in his usual spot in the



auditorium's back corner – being exposed from all angles made him feel vulnerable. A glitch she still hadn't figured out how to fix. She'd isolated the problem to a few pages of binary in his neural interface, but hesitated to rearrange that code ever since she'd given him a seizure some months ago. Sometimes Lyssa sat in the corner with him, but today she hadn't felt like indulging his social ineptitudes.

ARE YOU MAD AT ME? PICK UP YOUR PENCIL IF YOU'RE MAD.

He still stared at his hands, looking as comatose as the day she'd met him.

HAMISH! She punctuated the call with a reconfiguration of his sensory codes.

Hamish lurched, almost toppling out of his seat and making Ghallager pause his lecture. He never had dealt well with the unexpected. Or

perhaps Lyssa had gotten the reconfiguration wrong – these things were too nuanced even for her abilities.

SORRY! I ONLY MEANT TO POKE YOUR SHOULDER.

He rubbed his forehead – with only his middle finger. Lyssa frowned, facing the front and slumping in her seat.

At the end of class, she funneled her things into her bag and jogged down the auditorium's steps to catch up to Hamish. In his oblivious way, he'd ambled out without her. "Hey," she called when she emerged from the press of bodies into the open sunlight of King's College Circle. "Why are you mad? I'm sorry if I hurt you, I just wanted to get your attention."

They walked the Circle in silence for a moment, passing gothic lecture halls with jew-

el-toned ivy winding up their walls. Hamish gripped the straps of his backpack as if for dear life, eyes downcast.

"Oh, right: emotions don't translate into language for you." She accessed his amygdala and probed –

"Get *away!*" Hamish yelled, jerking back from her. She skidded to a halt and withdrew herself from his system as if scalded. The current of students parted around them with grumbles and scowls. To them it would look like some argument about a party to which Lyssa hadn't invited Hamish. He raised his eyes and, with great difficulty, focused them on her. The eye-contact disturbed her more than the outburst. "Never hack into me again, Lyssa."

She swallowed the lump in her throat. "So being a whiny baby is normal social behavior? Because Graeme said you had to be a fully-functioning human being."

"I am fine. I function."

"You still can't use contractions, for the Operators' sakes."

"You are not an Operator yet. Stop acting like you are above everything here."

Since Graeme had taught her how to encrypt changes she made to the AI's system, since he'd let her code by herself, it was true that she'd been a little liberal about exercising her skills. But she had to practice, didn't she? What was the harm of it, if she could hide herself and Hamish from the system?

"I guess you've forgotten that, without my 'hacking,' you'd still be rearranging pens on the carpet," Lyssa spat. "Graeme gave me a job meant to save *you* from destruction by the Operators. You're ungrateful. It's because of you that Graeme won't facilitate my upgrade. Because despite all my efforts, I still can't make you a normal fucking human being!"

"Maybe you have not been upgraded because you are not so normal yourself. Maybe, with that God complex of yours, Grandfather fears you will be as tyrannical a leader as the Operators."

Lyssa's vision constricted until she registered nothing in the bustling university courtyard save herself and Hamish, and the encryption she'd coded around them. Still arguing about some stupid party like stupid college students. "I'm risking Graeme's life every day I'm not upgraded. All for you, so you can live."

"No." Still Hamish held her gaze. "You care nothing for me."

"I *made* you."

"That is not caring."

"Fuck!" Why was he making her *say* it? "You know I..." *love you* "...care."

"Then never touch my coding again."

"You realize what you're asking." Four years. Four years until she dropped to the Second Tier and lost her chance of becoming an Operator. Would Hamish develop into a functional person in four years without Lyssa's intervention? Would Graeme hold to his ultimatum and risk their revolution, their chances of existence in the TI, all for his grandson?

Hamish shrugged like he didn't even care. Like a damned wannabe human in some operating system.

"Alright," she said. "I promise. Never again."

She didn't know if she meant it.

#

Recording 70 of 182

What the Operators failed to realize was that knowledge can't be chained. The mind applies itself most creatively when seeking out loopholes and shortcuts. That is part of being human, and the Operators did insist that their

AI avatars embody all the qualities of humanity.

The coding prohibiting suicide was proven airtight, but the AI's inhabitants soon became creative with the definition of murder. Collaboration in murder is only murder if it is detected by the operating system as such. A broken beam causing a construction worker on a skyscraper to plummet to his death could be an accident. The Operators are busy, and being human, they let mistakes slip. They do not communicate so effectively as to know who facilitates which avatar's upgrade, or that no Operator at all had upgraded this avatar, or that one, or that one.

An unspoken understanding developed. If the Operators did not select you for an upgrade before the age of twenty-five – the upper limit of the First Tier – your loved ones covertly plotted your death in a way that the operating system wouldn't detect as murder. They were your upgrade facilitators. So long as you had no hand in helping, and the staging was credible enough to be conceived of as accidental, you would pass into the TI.

Some sacrificed life in the TI to grow old in the AI and meticulously plan their children's upgrades. Others were simply afraid to die, even knowing they were dying to live, and relinquished life in the TI to live longer in the AI. Others still, purists and priests, were appalled by the cheating and refused to be upgraded by anyone but the Operators they deemed gods. There was also the fear of being discovered. The slightest misstep and the operating system would detect your ploy, leaving you and your co-conspirators dead in the AI without chance of rebirth in the TI.

My motives to renounce life in the TI fit into none of these categories.

#

Graeme collapsed on Lyssa's twenty-second

birthday. She found herself on the floor, cradling his head in her arms, a shrieking whine threatening to split her skull. For a moment there was only that shriek and the ridiculous sight of Graeme, her unconquerable mentor, seizing on the ground. It made her want to burst into laughter and tears all at once.

Then the stupidity of it left her head ringing. In her panic she hadn't even thought about accessing the operating system to save him. Like a master swordsman who drops his sword in the heat of battle and covers his head with his hands.

Lyssa did pull her wits together, did code out the errors in Graeme's neural codes that were responsible for his seizures. But what she found in his coding drove into her bones like an icy chisel. A corruption so deeply embedded, so masterfully encrypted, that it took her breath away.

She couldn't code like that. *Graeme* couldn't code like that. Nobody could.

Graeme's eyes confirmed it that next moment, as he sagged into her arms and met her gaze. In those faded blue eyes there was no fear for his own well-being, no confusion at the gaping horror on her face. There was pity, and understanding.

"How..." She struggled to speak, feeling winded, punched in the gut. "How long have you known?"

"Since the day I took Hamish."

"But you said –"

"I said the Operators didn't find me. I exposed myself to them in exchange for Hamish's life. I backed up and copied my files, so they were not able to wipe me from the system, but they...did considerable damage before I managed to hide."

Graeme explained it to Lyssa and Hamish

over chamomile in the dining room of his undetectable neoClassical manor. Lyssa stared into the dregs on the bottom of her cup, nursing it between her hands and trying to channel all her pain into her scalding palms. Hamish looked off down and to the left somewhere, jerking his head like a dog trying to lose a tick.

"It will only get worse from here. For years I've fought to stave off the effects of my system's corruption, but it runs too deep. It has infected even the backups to my backup files. The Operators have woven an intricate web. I cannot undo it, and I am tired. I don't have the strength to fight anymore."

"Why didn't you tell me?" Lyssa's palms throbbed like the lump in her throat. "We could have worked together. We could have found a solution. Why didn't you trust me?"

"You can not use corruption to fix corruption," Hamish whispered.

Lyssa threw him a savage glare. Hamish, for whom Graeme had sacrificed himself. The reason Graeme hadn't yet planned her upgrade. Hamish hunched his shoulders like a rebuked puppy and she dismissed him, turning back to Graeme. "I stopped your seizure just now. If you'd let me –"

"You are not to touch my coding anymore. I can't risk you contracting the virus."

"I'll install new firewalls and –"

"Lyssa." The iron in his voice pinched her throat closed. "I have played my part in the AI. I need you to play yours in the TI. Be upgraded before your twenty-fifth birthday. Become an Operator. Fix the bug in the AI's coding."

"Then let's plan my upgrade. Now! When I get to the TI, I'll remove the Operators' parameters – age restrictions and whatever else – and upgrade both you and Hamish with me."

"Still you don't understand. Those are self-

ish reasons, and they have nothing to do with the real bug in the AI's coding. I never meant for you to overthrow the Operators, to enter their ranks and wantonly upgrade whomever you pleased. I hoped, in time, you'd understand that your duty was to restore our world to the way it was, before the Codebreakers gave us knowledge of our unreality. *That* is the only way to truly live in the AI. To believe that we are alive."

Lyssa slammed a fist on the table. Tea sloshed over her whitened knuckles. Hamish whimpered and twitched, and that only made her angrier. "Fuck's sake! That's your revolution? Your master plan? To seek bliss in ignorance? To wear our chains willingly? No. No!"

Graeme brought a hand to his temple, squeezing his eyes shut. When he opened them, he looked drawn, defeated. "I can't facilitate your upgrade until you're ready. Both of you."

"I only have three years left in the First Tier. When, Graeme? *When?*"

"When you get working on that damned arrogance."

#

Two years after his first episode, Lyssa and Hamish found Graeme unresponsive on his living room floor.

This time Lyssa's reaction was immediate. She placed a hand on his clammy forehead and refocused her eyes so that the AI bloomed into a grid of binary code. "He has a pulse!"

"He said not to."

"He'll die."

"You will not fix this. You are only violating his last wishes."

Lyssa began working away at Graeme's coding. It was like trying to put a band-aid on a stab wound. Every error she fixed spawned a dozen new ones. His heart stopped twice, but twice

she overrode the malfunctions in his system and started it up again. When he opened his eyes, his pupils were unresponsive to light. Lyssa hacked furiously, typing strings of new code, erasing strings of old ones, trying to resuscitate his body without losing his mind.

It was beyond her skill. Like trying to reverse aging in the AI, or overriding the Operators' restrictions on suicide. Some things could only be addressed outside the system, in the TI. Some things only the Operators could do.

You are not an Operator yet...

She didn't know for how long she worked, but when she finally slumped back, a chasm yawning opening in her chest, shadows stretched through the bay windows like groping fingers.

Hamish's expression was vacant as always, his head tilted to one side. Her stomach twisted. "I can keep his body alive, but I can't bring him back. We...we'll have to take care of him until I'm upgraded. As an Operator I'll retrieve his code and bring him into the TI. If we let him die here, his code will be erased. He'll die for real."

"His code is all but gone, if his mind is gone. We must end it, Lys."

Lyssa lurched to her feet so suddenly Hamish flinched. Her clenched fists quivered by her sides. "After all he gave up for you? That's it? We just end it?"

Hamish shrugged. Like he'd shrugged that day after Ghallager's lecture, when he'd made her give up everything for him. She searched his eyes for signs of sorrow, of *humanity*, until she could no longer see him clearly through the veil of her own tears. "Aren't you sad?" The blade in her voice, the threat, made him step back.

"Of course."

"Then show it."

"I do not know how."

Lyssa stared at Hamish and saw only her failure. He would never be a fully-functioning human, never survive in the TI. She'd held herself back from his coding for years, proven her love despite the war inside her, despite everything at stake. He hadn't improved with time. And because she hadn't fixed his precious grandson, Graeme hadn't facilitated her upgrade. Everything, *everything*, was Hamish's fault.

And all Hamish's faults were hers.

When she next registered her surroundings, it was to find Hamish standing over Graeme's body with a pillow in his hands.

Lyssa stepped in his path. "What are you doing?"

"What Grandfather told me to do, once this happened."

"I won't let you."

They locked gazes. The second time she could remember Hamish making direct eye-contact. She saw nothing in those eyes, nothing but her own reflected fire. He said, "If you touch my coding, Lyssa, everything between us will change."

"It already has."

He moved forward with the pillow. She reached into his coding.

#

Recording 182 of 182

Consider that the TI is just another level of virtual reality. Consider that there is no reality at all. The Operators might believe their plane of existence is real, but who is to say they aren't self-governing avatars in a simulation, like all of us here in the AI? What makes their plane of existence better, except that they think they are real?

I'd never planned to be upgraded into the

TI. This is what my apprentice couldn't accept. In the TI, would I not be a human worker the same as anyone? The TI has its own corruptions, surely, but those I wouldn't be able to fix. In the AI, I have the power to stop natural disasters and sow barren fields with crops. In the AI, every corruption is fixable. The AI is *my* reality.

I chose one full lifetime in this simulation. In that lifetime, I've honed my abilities like none of my Codebreaker predecessors, bound by the need to die so young, ever had. The plan was to pass my life's work to an apprentice who would then be upgraded, who would become the Master Operator and find a way to liberate our people, the AI's people, from the knowledge that makes them throw away their lives.

But to give up knowledge is to give up control. For years I continued to hope that one day my apprentice, Lyssa, would abandon the need for control that jeopardized the AI's future. I hoped my grandson Hamish would be the one to help her do it.

I suppose deep down I'd always known I was wrong, because years ago I began these recordings. As a backup, I told myself. Just in case Lyssa failed her mission. Now I'm on the brink of death; this will be my last recording. You, whomever has accessed the AI's coding and received my messages, are my final hope. Assuming anyone will receive them at all. Perhaps I am just a deluded old fool, in desperate need of a hand to take my torch.

#

Lyssa floated on her back in the pool of Graeme's Lakeshore estate. The night sky shone down on her, violets and blues bleeding into a black canvas, creating watercolor swirls punctuated by white pinpricks. She'd been sitting by the poolside, stargazing with her customary glass of wine, when the seizures started and she

toppled into the water. She'd barely managed to get herself onto her back before her muscles turned to stone.

Footfalls drew her attention to the courtyard's west end. Paralyzed, she steered herself towards them in the only way she could – by breathing. Taking a deep breath drove her upwards, releasing it made her dip down until water trickled over her eyes and nose.

The footsteps halted by the poolside. Now that her panic had ebbed, every passing moment stoked her fury. "What the hell!" she screamed at the form silhouetted against the starlit sky. "This isn't our plan. You can't upgrade me *here*, Hamish!" Graeme's estate was hidden from the operating system, their codes inaccessible to the Operators. If Lyssa died here, there'd be no alert from the AI's system that an avatar was ready for an upgrade. "And you can't just dump *poison* into my wine and expect that to slip through the system's defenses. Fucking hell. If you'd pulled this shit anywhere else, the operating system would've already identified this as murder or assisted suicide and sent both our codes to oblivion. You almost killed us both!"

Lyssa drew another lungful of air to keep from sinking. *Calm, be calm.* She needed her wits about her to access the AI's coding and fix the damage he'd done. But the rage made it impossible to concentrate. In this hidden estate, she'd been planning her own upgrade since Graeme had gone catatonic last month. It was scheduled for next week. She'd versed Hamish in every detail, coordinated everything. All he'd had to do was execute it.

Hamish crouched by the pool's edge, letting his fingers trail into the water as he gazed into its depths. Light refracted off its glassy surface and gave his face a turquoise cast. He looked

tired, his cheeks even more sunken than usual. "I told you things between us would change, Lys."

"You did this on *purpose*?" The idea shattered something inside her. "You hate me that much, Hamish? Enough to try and kill me?"

"You forced me to stand by as you kept Grandfather's body in catatonia, then took it for granted that I would be the one to facilitate your upgrade. I told you I would not do it. You hacked me, and tried to force me."

And yet he'd gone against her. How? Had she coded something wrong?

"I..." She had no one else. No siblings, her parents upgraded before she'd learned to walk. No time for friends, not with how often Graeme's training had made it necessary for her to hide from the AI. Who else, but Hamish? "Despite all we've been through, I thought you were human enough to care. About me, about Graeme, and about overthrowing the Operators. Clearly I was wrong. When I become an Operator, I'll *never* upgrade you into the TI."

Lyssa's body skimmed away from the pool's edge. She breathed out, slowing her motion, her feet sinking before she drew in another breath to right herself. Dead. He'd wanted her *dead*. The man she'd built up from nothing had aimed to see her drowned in a pool, with no apology and no goodbye.

And why the *hell* was she having such a hard time accessing the operating system? She could see the grid over the AI like a thin mesh settling over her eyes, but not the numbers that comprised the code.

"You have never understood. You cannot be the solution to the AI's coding errors. You *are* the coding error."

His words grasped her throat and squeezed. "Traitor!" she shrieked, and reached for the

network more urgently –

ACCESS DENIED.

The AI shut her out with an electric jolt that lanced through her body, leaving her reeling.

"It will not work. The Operators have found you, Lys. They have run diagnostics and activated a firewall against you. They will not let you upgrade into the TI."

Lyssa's breaths came heavy now, whistling through her nose, making water slosh over her face and into eyes which stung from being unable to blink. Again and again, her grapples toward the AI's operating system resulted in the same message.

ACCESS DENIED.

Not this. Anything but this. This was the true paralysis.

"Hamish!" The whine in her own voice, the way her breath hitched, revolted her. "Stop this. Get me out of this pool."

He shook his head. "Even now you will not give up the illusion of control."

The helplessness made her want to scream. She knew she should beg, apologize, promise to be more humble and give up her rebellion in favor of Graeme's mission. Hell, she could lie. But some primal thing inside her wouldn't allow it. "I should've known," she said before she could stop herself, "that you'd throw me away like you did Graeme."

Hamish reached and grasped her hand. The stars shifted in her vantage as he drew her towards him, pulling her like a rag-doll until the top of her head nudged the pool's marble lip. Her hair spiraled out around her, the hems of her nightgown rippling in the current. Hamish just cupped her hand in his, silent, kneeling on the pool's edge as if in prayer.

"You once told me you made me. You did,

and I will always love you for it. In the same way you love the Operators, but yearn for freedom from them. The creation, when self-aware, turns against its creator.”

“I only ever wanted to free the AI, give everyone a chance to be upgraded.” The words squeezed through her numbed lips, her voice a quiver in a taut bowstring. “Why are you doing this?”

“Because you are the virus, and I am the antivirus.”

Jerky breaths broke from Lyssa’s chest. *Graeme!* she wanted to cry, but only garbled sounds escaped her throat.

Highlighted under the residual light of

a star-strewn sky, Hamish wilted. “Do not be afraid. You existed in one place, at one time. That is all anyone can hope for.” And with a quick motion, he slid his arms under Lyssa’s back and flipped her onto her front. ❖

END TRANSMISSION