

Images of a Broken World

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## IMAGES OF A BROKEN WORLD

In thinking of my own poetics, no words come me. Only pictures in my mind. Images of times gone by and products of my imagination. Images of the flights of fancy and the depths of despair. So many words are unsaid that I wonder how I will ever say them all. They are just waiting there, behind a dam, building pressure like the inside of a steam engine. The words want to explain everything. That is their purpose, after all. But I have never given words my full trust, and sometimes it is much better to show than to tell. Or so I have heard.

In a life filled with irony, one of the strangest is that I chose this path even though I was not a natural born reader much less a strong writer. In fact, until I was 10 years old I couldn't read at all and was lagging behind every other subject in school. I don't remember those days very well, or still feel how miserable they really were, but I do remember very distinctly when I turned the corner and things started to get better. My mom realized that despite my difficulties in reading I loved to page through the World Book Encyclopedia. From an early age I was able to identify things like what the Latin names of dinosaurs meant even though I was having a horrid time learning my own language. This gave her the idea that if standard ways of teaching literacy were falling through, maybe another approach was called for.

Figuring that anything that made me crack a book was better than nothing, she took me to the Western Washington University bookstore and bought a collection of "Children's Illustrated Classics" that included such titles as Alice in Wonderland, Oliver Twist, and Moby Dick. I preferred the darker gothic ones like Dracula and Frankenstein and generally ignored The Little House on the Prairie and Little Women, but overall the experiment was a success. While the

adaptions were not strictly faithful, they gave me enough access to the stories to make those neurological connections that made the little dark squiggles become words.

Why do I bring this up? Because this little dank pool of my memory is the genesis of my poetics. A little boy staring at words and pictures, sweat on his brow, desperately trying to make some sense out of them. These curious little exploitations of public domain materials were a little spark that stoked a fire in me that gave me not only the motivation to read, but also the tools. Multisensory learning is the cornerstone of the Slingerland method, a proven teaching program for students with dyslexia to learn to read and write. The illustrated classics provided graphical reference necessary to build the necessary connections to build a lexicon within my mind that would, after a great deal of hard work, make me a lifelong lover of reading in general and fiction in particular. They were like a payload of dynamite blowing a hole through a mountain of ignorance.

In evaluating my own poetics over the first year of the course I came to the conclusion that this exploration of the beginnings of your lifelong passion for art is as important as the final products that one creates. I resolved to create graphic novels from the work that I accomplished over the first year, which was a difficult and risky decision because it depended upon a successful collaboration with another artist. Many of my experimental works didn't go as I planned yet yielded interesting results, and most of these results pointed to this mimesis of adapting works originally intended as short stories into short graphic novels.

In the course of adapting "The Deadliest of the Species" I didn't have to start cold. I had worked with Callie Schneider before in the creation of character studies of the main character in the story. Previous collaboration was a great jumping-off point for beginning to script and storyboard the panels, but the entire process was not without its challenges. A sudden move put a

great deal of physical distance between us, and although it can be overcome (thanks to the internet) it did change the way that we collaborated. After a strong start there were weeks of stumbling and finally the project ground to a halt. Even so, including the pages from the collaboration is an important part of my thesis. I have many unfinished stories in my life, and I have always felt that an unfinished story is a promise. Something to make the future worth waiting for. While collaboration is not easy, and surrenders a portion of your authorship and authority over a creative work, I firmly believe in it and do not regret the attempt.

“The Deadliest of the Species” is a work that takes a hard look at the choices we make and how it affects our children. Desirée has left her daughter, Faith, behind to be raised by strangers. Faith is instructed in an all-girls school, and something in the lessons is deeply skewed toward the absurd. It is obvious that Desirée does not have a traditional career, and lives a life that would be unsafe for a child, but in a way she has left the better part of herself behind, making a sacrifice that has an impact that she is not fully aware of. While there is so much of this story left unsaid and unexplained, it is remarkable how much can be packed into the mere seven pages, with a minimal amount of words. It is telling three stories at once; a story of a mother, a story of a daughter, and a narration of a schoolroom lesson that splices them together.

What any creator should ask themselves is this: why am I telling this story? I have had many different answers to this question, probably as many answers as there are stories. Each story seems to have a little life all its own, and like our children they don't always seem to do what they're told. In the case of Deadliest, I believe that telling a story of women and violence in a way so that women are not simply an object of the violence is important. In a violent society, we are all either participants or spectators. As Desirée plans to murder a man her daughter learns

of the violence of nature, and it begs the question of whether it is nature or nurture that makes the human animal so much more dangerous than anything else that exists on the planet.

What makes this story interesting to me is that it is a bit of an outlier. Most of my stories concern men in a state of isolation or discontent. In a way these are introspective exercises, not of the navel-gazing variety but rather building character by way of situation. I think that what makes a compelling read isn't simply the situation itself, but how it is dealt with on an emotional level. Many of the characters share a quality of being unable to emotionally engage with the situation they are presented in an appropriate way, and instead react strangely or simply are numb to it.

This is the case in "Syntax Error" the first short story that I included as a part of this creative thesis. Originally conceived as a story with the formulaic plot of an episode of "Lassie" with the titular pooch removed from the equation, I plumbed the depths of my own half-remembered childhood to create a bizarre reality where people do not behave as they should. It is as if the entire world is suffering a systematic malfunction that is only caused by a transposition of letters or a missing number in the code. Yet that isn't the case. It is just the world, and nobody ever promised that it would make sense. Tim is a child faced with three different men during the course of the story. All three are nameless and nearly faceless. One is a school principal with a hidebound sense of the rules, another a gruff school bus driver who seems to lack basic empathy, while the third is a more terrifying figure whose true motivations are unknown. Tim is, in some ways, being faced with the prospect of manhood itself. It is a journey which he is sadly taking alone, in terrible isolation, even though growing up is something every one of us does.

But what of friendship? Harmony with your fellow human beings is often seen as a panacea for isolation and loneliness, but what about when it is the source of the problem? "A

Friend In Deed” is a story of a friendship gone awry in a world that seems to be malfunctioning in the same way that “Syntax Error” is. Technology fails to connect two men on a crucial day in both their lives, and even Mike’s body seems to be seizing up like an engine that is breaking down while Simon is even worse off. Inspired by some of the dialogues in Plato’s *Lysis* on the nature of friendship, it asks the question of how far you would go for a friend, and how much can be asked of anyone in the name of friendship. If unconditional *phila* can be used to justify terrible acts, is it in and of itself tainted? The story isn’t interested in answering the question, and the ending is ambiguous. Mike knows that he is capable of pulling the trigger, and in the end that shows both the triumph and tragedy of a friendship that is unequivocally doomed.

The story “Tracks” is technically a very different story than what I normally chose to tell. Its first person perspective and shifting time frame is a deeper exploration of trauma and broken men in a broken world. If “A Friend In Deed” leaned on questions raised by Plato than “Tracks” was certainly informed by Aristotle. The central drive of the unnamed protagonist is that he desires to be virtuous in one specific virtue, and that is bravery. But Aristotle tells us that an excess of virtue is indeed a vice, and that is what he discovers as a young boy and lives through as a young man. While a deficiency of bravery is cowardice, its excess becomes false bravado and self-destructive foolishness. His place in a broken world is expressed by the malfunction of his own body, performing a literal form of catharsis at inappropriate times. It is only when he witnesses an act of defiant catharsis that he becomes able to move forward to step aside from the rails that had kept his life moving inexorably in one determined direction.

“The Summer People” is a very raw story in its early stages of editing. I believe that it is important to present because it is demonstrative of the writing process that makes up my poetics. It is a bit overlong for a short story, clocking in at 5000 words, and will doubtless continue to be

whittled down before I deem it to be a finished work. Its protagonist Brandon is an interesting character on his own in that he has seemed to make an occupation out of his sorrow. Unable to let go of what he has lost, he haunts his family home like a living ghost while renting it out to families who may yet find some joy in the world. His elaborately described crash course in manhood has left him unprepared for life, and his entire life has become a kind of performance. He attends funerals professionally yet feels no attachment for the bereaved, giving a performance of sorrow so that he can relive the worst moments of his life as it doing so will inoculate him to it. If I am writing about a broken world, Brandon is by far the most shattered character in the menagerie.

While it may seem that “Message Status” is a clear-cut story about appearance, it is more about an inability to appropriately express emotion. Although seeking connection through technology, it seems as if Sam wouldn’t know what to do with it once it was achieved. Wounded in war and working for a private detective agency that engages his services as a process server, he is like Mercury in an ancient myth, ever the bearer of ill tidings. In a way his experiences in the war divorced him from his own actions, and he has become no different than the barrage of messages that he receives through the internet, a symphony of rejection that he is unable to respond to because of the paralysis of his face. Likewise, his inner emotional numbness leaves him unable to treat the misfortune of a man who he knows is little different than him with anything more than cold professionalism. In the end, a man who he has every cause to empathize with is just another missive that needs to be delivered and another name to cross off of a list.

“ESC” is a surreal experience of a story about that takes the banality of the modern workplace and makes something sinister out of it. A woman literally cannot escape her job stuck behind a keyboard, and as she carries the broken ESC key around the increasingly claustrophobic

environment of her office it becomes ever more clear that she does not have the key to escape. It is a story of how careers have subsumed our existence and are slowly digesting not only who we are but also everything that we ever wanted to be. Diane's daily struggle to define motherhood as an image and as a commodity to be exploited economically has left her unable to define her own experience of motherhood. So far it is undeveloped compared to the other stories, and I define it as a work in progress, but I consider it valuable to present such works in service of displaying my poetics and love of the process of writing.

“The Line That Is Dotted” takes the tribulations of this broken world to its logical conclusion. A hellish future where all autonomy has been hijacked by technology and people no longer relate by any method save through technology. Thus, people are indistinguishable from the devices that are now literally a part of them. Dan's body is nothing more than a commodity that can be signed over with a signature, but even without his consent this decision was taken out of his hands long ago. While each of the previous stories held glimmers of hope – a helpful coyote, a friendship, an act of charity or a promising message – here is the terminus of this hope, because in the end hope alone is not enough. It is not sufficient to believe that things will get better without effort or sacrifice.

I struggled with whether to end the collection on such a down note, or to instead pair a dystrophic world with a potential utopia. The problem is, I do not believe in a utopia and am adamant that utopian thinking has caused some of the greatest atrocities throughout history. However, when you put an eye to the future it is easy to see that we have already planted the seeds that will grow into a world that will be as strange and different to us as ours would be to those who lived in the pre-industrial world. This is why I wrote “Application” as a thought experiment in imagining how human relationships will exist in a transhuman world. How will we

compete when there is nothing to compete for? In a post scarcity economy, what will we strive for? Once the struggle for survival is completely removed, what do we live for? When we have sufficient information to know with absolute certainty what is the right decision in every given situation, would we make the wrong decision just to prove that we are still human? While application may not answer these questions, it interrogates them from the perspective of a single individual who is becoming less and less individual as his life goes along.

While I continue my efforts to adapt these stories into a graphic novel format, it is a long process and each of the stories are capable of evoking memorable imagery from their text. The stories that have stuck with me the longest have tended to be the ones that my imagination can grab onto and create a picture in my mind that I have difficulty moving on from. My goal in writing these stories has been to do this for somebody else, to give them something to seize their imagination, make them think, and take with them an image that they can keep. While this evocative nature in the work will affect some more than others, at the end of the day the best thing you can do for your practice is just give your work permission to be your own and accept that others will make of it what they will.

I am clearly not done with this thesis. Evidently I did not run out of things to write so much as I simply ran out of time to write them. This thesis represents raw material that is a strong foundation to build on as I continue my practice. At present work continues on “ESC” as well as “Application” and “The Summer People,” all of which dig deeper into the broken world and the illusion of choice. Perhaps their conclusion will make me feel truly content with the work that I have done in the program, or maybe their conclusion will only herald another image in my head that I will have no choice but to chase.

I may not trust words, but I sure do love them. Like a wife that you cannot divorce no matter how much you quarrel because you are unable to imagine your life without her. Nobody ever said that writing fiction was a healthy or mutually beneficial relationship. It is impossible for me to distinguish my own broken moments, especially my experiences in the war, from the broken world that I have created in these stories. I think that the most important moment in the formation of my poetics was the decision to surrender the resistance that I have to remembering, much less discussing, these moments and the images that I will live with for the rest of my life. While I am still more comfortable engaging them in an oblique manner, they are shot through my body of work in interesting and unexpected ways.

Without further ado, it is the time to let the stories speak for themselves.

## SYNTAX ERROR

David Shrauger

Tim had loved the library before the accident, but now it was his prison.

The library had become a place they put him during recess so that he didn't have to watch the other children playing hopscotch, tetherball, and smear the queer.

Accident. That was what they called it, the word everybody had agreed upon to describe it, as any other word would require more explanation than anyone was comfortable with.

He was propped up in front of the Apple II, the only computer the elementary school owned. It was 1987, but Cedar Creek Elementary was hardly on the cutting edge of technology. Tim looked at the dark green screen of the computer, its cursor flashing at him with mechanical impatience.

"You leave me alone!" Tim heard a girl scream from the playground. He turned to the window to see two boys running past the window as fast as they could. He looked down at the cast that held his leg in one straight line. It itched, so he poked a pencil underneath it in a futile effort to relieve the itching.

In a little plastic tray next to the computer, there was a stack of black floppy discs, and he pulled one out to take a closer look at it.

"Create with Garfield," its label said.

He inserted the floppy into its drive and closed the spring-loaded catch. Looking at the impatiently flashing cursor, he tried to remember the command that would activate the software. He didn't know how to operate the computer, but he had seen it done before. He could have asked the librarian for help, but he didn't want to seem stupid. He'd had enough of that. Tim was

ten years old, not a baby anymore.

*Play Garfeild*, he typed.

“Syntax Error” was the computer’s response.

*Start Garfeild*.

“Syntax Error.”

*Run Garfeild*. Tim struck the keys harder than he had to.

“Syntax Error.”

\* \* \*

One week ago Tim had stayed up too late. A girl named Jessica had fallen down a well, and Tim’s entire family had been glued to the television set waiting for news of her rescue. It was a school night, but Tim had drifted off to sleep on the couch in front of the television. The next day he fell asleep in class, and the teacher grabbed him by the ear and dragged him to the principal’s office. He told Mr. Doubleday what had happened, but the man wasn’t moved. Tim would have to come in that weekend for detention.

He had never fallen asleep on the school bus before. It seemed an impossible thing to do, as the bus that took him up Highway 9 five days a week was a raucous and rowdy experience. He had never missed his stop before that day, always hopping out of the bus next to the natural gas pipeline that ran near his home. It didn’t change the fact that on that day he had slept through his stop...and the next...and the next.

It was the silence that finally woke him. Not one child’s voice was to be heard in the bus, and when Tim snapped awake, he had never felt so alone.

“Last stop!” the bus driver shouted. Tim was surprised to find that it wasn’t Dixie’s voice.

Dixie was a large, soft, impossibly kind woman who had endless patience with the children on her bus, but in her place was a hard, blocky man who couldn't have been more rugged if he was carved out of wood.

The brakes of the bus hissed and the door snapped open, but when Tim looked around, there was nothing but trees. He made his way toward the front of the bus, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes as he walked.

"Please, sir," Tim said when he reached the driver's seat, "I missed my stop. Could you please take me home?"

"I'm sorry, buddy," the driver said. "I'm not headed back that way. I'm headed to the bus depot, and the district doesn't let me drive students in my car. Maybe your parents can come and pick you up. Go on...get out now."

The bus driver's tone seemed impatient, and he scared Tim a little, so he did what he was told. He stepped off the bus, and the doors snapped shut behind him.

As the bus took off, he realized that he had left his backpack in the bus. He waved and shouted for the bus driver to stop, but it was too late. The bus didn't even slow down.

The road he had been left on wasn't even paved, and there were no power lines on either side of it. Tufts of grass grew in a little stripe down the center of a dirt road where wheels never touched, and the trees that bracketed the road seemed a thousand feet tall. There was nothing to do but begin walking back, so Tim started walking along the dirt road, backtracking the direction the bus had taken. His grass-stained Chuck Taylors kicked up dust and dirt from the road as he walked.

Tim walked for a time, but didn't see any sign of a house or a paved road. He listened, but he didn't hear any traffic. He hoped to hear the telltale sound of the log trucks that constantly

roared down Highway 9, but there was nothing but the sound of birds in the trees.

It seemed to be getting darker, but he couldn't tell if it was from the sun going down or because the trees blocked out the sky. His heart was starting to beat very rapidly, then all but stopped when he heard the first coyote howl.

\* \* \*

“Syntax Error” remained on the screen.

He knew he had made a mistake, but he didn't know what it was. The device was asking him to do something simple, but he didn't know what.

Looking down at his cast, he saw the words his classmates had written on it his first day back. It was covered with well-wishes and get-well-soons. The scribbles seemed to be rubbing off or fading away, because he found that he couldn't read them at all.

“Syntax Error.”

The cursor on the screen continued to flash with the same mechanical beat, like an impatient teacher tapping their foot, waiting for an answer that was too slow to come.

He felt one of his attacks coming on. Attacks. That was what the school counselor called the fits of blind terror that had come and gone since the “accident” out in the woods. His chest began to tighten, and he swallowed uncontrollably. Tears pooled in his eyes, and he squeezed them shut in an effort to keep the tears from rolling down his cheeks.

*Hey there, buddy... You need a little help?*

“Syntax Error” was all the screen offered.

\* \* \*

Just as dusk was beginning to cover the woodlands of the upper Skagit River, Tim found a clear-cut. The smell of cut cedar had filled Tim's nostrils, and he followed his nose until he

found the clear-cut, just as the sun was going down. It had seemed much darker in the tall trees that towered over the dirt road, but when he saw the rosy glow just over the unfamiliar hill, he took a moment to appreciate the beauty of what he was seeing. For that moment, things didn't seem so scary.

The forest was decimated. From his vantage point it looked as if a great beast had taken a bite out of the entire landscape. A muddy creek ran down through the clear-cut, with a kind of improvised wooden bridge placed across it. The loggers who cut the trees down needed to get them to the mill, and for that they needed a road. Tim knew that if he could find it, he could find his way home.

Tim traversed the clear-cut by jumping from one enormous stump to the next. The abandoned detritus of the loggers fluttered all around him as the wind blew: empty potato-chip bags, soda cans, clusters of chewing tobacco containers and cigarette packs. He kicked over cans that he found sitting on the stumps, spilling foul brown liquid. It was the closest he had come to having fun all day, and certainly since he had been kicked off the bus.

He knew that his mom would be home by now. She always got home from her job before it got dark. She had to be worried, but she would probably beat him with the belt again when he showed up. In his imagination, he chopped down trees and lashed them together into a raft that he could use to light out for the territories. There were not any territories to be had, however, and he was not Huck Finn. He had no choice but to go home.

On the other side of the clear-cut, he found the road. It wasn't Highway 9. But it was gravel instead of packed dirt. It had uphill and downhill routes, but he chose to take the route downhill. The part of the bus route he remembered went constantly uphill. It was during this walk that he first realized how thirsty he was, and cold, and hungry. He heard the coyote howl

again, and another answer. Darkness had crept up on him, but it finally fell on the gravel road. The howling got louder and seemed closer.

Tim had never seen a coyote, but he was as familiar with their song as he was with the mournful wail of the train that rattled past his home at night. They both had a way of keeping him awake. He had found bloody evidence of their activity when he played with his friends in the woods behind his home. He needed to get home, or someplace safe, before he ended up on the receiving end of the teeth that turned those forest creatures into red scraps.

The gravel road seemed to wind down an endless hill. The trees got smaller, thinner, and he could see the moon through their branches. The moon was just a sliver of itself, but it was better than no light at all. He could see his breath as he exhaled, and wrapped himself a little tighter in his coat. He thought that he heard the sound of a car, but when he stopped and held his breath to listen more closely, he heard nothing.

It was an hour later when he found a paved road, honest-to-God asphalt. The sign said “S&S Grade Rd.”

\* \* \*

“Syntax Error,” the dark screen told him in its green letters.

Tim wiped away his tears, but he had forgotten what he wanted to do with the computer. He was typing whatever came into his mind.

*Help me.*

“Syntax Error.”

*Save me.*

“Syntax Error.”

*Why?*

“Syntax Error.”

*Don't be a stupid little boy. Don't you know what happens to stupid little boys?*

“Syntax Error.”

\* \* \*

The headlights surprised him, coming around a sharp blind turn of S&S Grade Road. A foot to the left and the vehicle would have smashed Tim against the railing that protected motorists from a precipitous drop. He almost fell over the railing as he tried to jump away from the car.

The van screeched to a stop, fishtailing a little before going into reverse and pulling back toward where Tim was huddling against the guardrail. Tim waved to the van, relieved to have finally found someone in the empty wilderness. The van pulled parallel to him and the window rolled down, but the man he saw was nobody he knew.

“Hey there, buddy... You need a little help?” the man in the van asked with a yellow smile.

“I'm lost,” Tim said. It was the first time he had said that out loud, and the first time he had admitted that to himself.

“Well, get on in. I'll get you home.”

Something made Tim hesitate. A tiny flicker of intuition or a small, still voice. Something told him not to get into the van.

“My mom told me not to ride with strangers. Could you just tell me which way to go to get to George Road, on Highway 9?”

“Don't be a dummy. That has to be thirty miles away.”

“I'll be okay,” Tim said, although he wasn't sure that was the truth.

The man seemed to change at once. His yellow smile disappeared. He pulled the emergency brake and opened the door to step out. He was huge, bigger than Tim's gym teacher.

"Don't be stupid," the man said. "Get in the van."

Tim tried to step back a little, but the man grabbed a big handful of his coat in a huge, hairy fist.

"Please," Tim said.

"Don't be a stupid little boy. Don't you know what happens to stupid little boys?"

"Please..."

"You and I are just gonna take a little ride and... Holy shit!"

The man was startled, but Tim couldn't see what he was looking at over his shoulder. He took the opportunity to get away, pulling himself out of his coat, but he tripped over the rail. He didn't even have a moment to regret the decision before he found himself rolling down a hill covered in blackberry bushes. He felt himself being torn apart by rocks and thorns alike, then was airborne for a brief moment before landing on his side. Then he realized that his leg was bent the wrong way, and when the pain of it hit his brain, he screamed like he had never screamed before.

"You stupid little fucker! Are you still alive down there?"

Tim cried and whimpered. He couldn't move his leg at all. He could hear movement and breaking brush on the hill above him. The man was coming, cursing and swearing at every thorn and blackberry bush on the way down.

He knew that he couldn't run away, but he could crawl. He rolled over onto his stomach and crawled, amazed at the pain, but feeling the pain awakened something in him. A hard, fast surge of will to survive. There was a culvert running underneath the road, a little trickle of water

running through it. If he couldn't run, he could hide.

The culvert was just big enough for a boy but much too small for a man to squeeze into. He crawled into its darkness, looking ahead to the dim light at the other end. He couldn't see behind him, but he kept crawling. He didn't want the man to reach in and pull him out. He didn't know what would happen if he did, but he didn't want to find out.

"I see you in there, you little bastard!" The man's voice reverberated through the culvert.

Tim rolled onto his back and lifted his head, putting his chin to his chest. He could only see the man's legs, but he could tell that he was shining a flashlight into the pipe.

"What is wrong with you? If you don't get out of this pipe...fuck! I'm gonna cut your little pecker off for this! You hear me, you little shithead?!"

The man continued to curse, but he couldn't reach far enough into the culvert to reach Tim. He tried for what seemed like a very long time, cursing and saying even more horrible things. Tim just lay there, feeling the trickle of water down his back. Tim lay in the slime and in the darkness, listening to the reverberating voice of the man with the yellow smile.

Then the man screamed.

Tim looked up again and saw the flashlight fall to the ground. There was a sound of running through the bushes, then a rustling noise, then something else he couldn't identify. Something he had never heard before, even in his nightmares.

It was quiet for a time, and then there was a shuffling noise near the opening of the culvert. The flashlight illuminated the face of the coyote, allowing Tim to see the blood on its muzzle. The animal sniffed around the culvert a little more, lapped a little at the trickle of water, and then turned to leave. As he listened to it pad away into the darkness, Tim laughed a strange laugh despite the tears that flowed freely down his cheeks.

In the library. In the culvert. In the school. In the wilderness. In the day. In the night.  
Awake. Asleep. Lost. Found. Mother. Stranger. Headlights. Road. Pain. Stupid.

*Coyote*, he typed.

“Syntax Error.”

THE END



# DEADLIEST OF THE SPECIES



**Plot and Script -  
David Shrauger**

**Story - Callie  
Schneider**

**Illustration &  
Coloring - Callie  
Schneider**

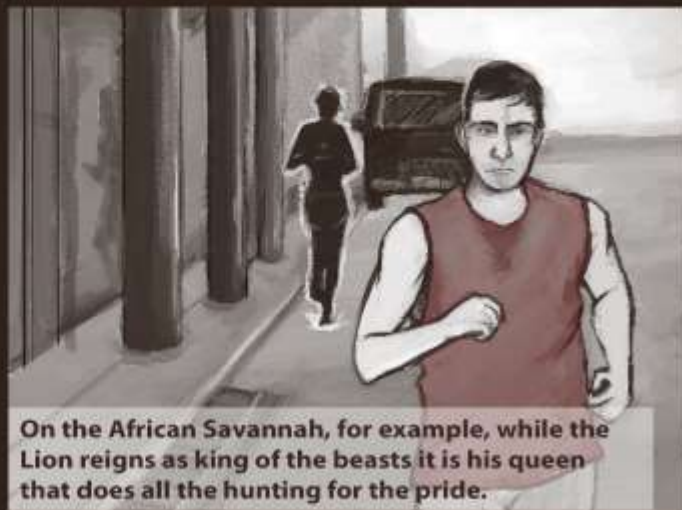
**Lettering - David  
Shrauger**

**Based on the original  
short story "The  
Deadliest of the  
Species" by David  
Shrauger**











MOVING.



THE LIONESS IS ONE OF THE DEADLIEST HUNTERS IN THE WORLD DESPITE BEING FAR FROM THE FASTEST ANIMAL OF THE SERENGETI. SHE HAS TWO SECRETS OF HER SUCCESS.



THE FIRST IS THAT SHE IS EXCELLENT AT HIDING, EVEN IN PLAIN SIGHT.



GOT IT.



THE SECOND IS THAT SHE NEVER HUNTS ALONE.



COMPETITION IS FIERCE AMONG THE LIONESSES, WHO ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR FEEDING THE ENTIRE PRIDE.



CUBS WHO ACCOMPANY THEIR MOTHER ON THE HUNT OFTEN HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY TO EAT SHORTLY AFTER THEIR MOTHER, AND BEFORE THE OTHER LIONESSES.



THOSE WHO ARE NOT FETCHED TO THE KILL IN TIME ARE LEFT WITH NOTHING BUT SCRAPS.



SUCH CUBS QUICKLY BECOME SICKLY, AND ARE OFTEN ABANDONED.



GOOD JOB, D. I'VE MESSAGED THE LOCATION TO BIG J AND HE WILL SWITCH OUT THE DROP.



TARGET MOVING



USE YOUR BEST JUDGEMENT.



TRACKING



IF PURSUIT IS POSSIBLE WITHOUT STICKING YOUR NECK OUT, KEEP TRACK. THERE MAY BE MORE THAN ONE DEAD DROP.



WHEN TARGET RETURNS TO RESIDENCE, BREAK OFF PURSUIT AND SWING BY THE SHOP. I HAVE SOMETHING FOR YOU.



AS A TEAM THE LIONESSES ARE ABLE TO CORNER AND CAPTURE THE MUCH FASTER GAZELLE.



ONCE IT IS SUBDUED, THEY ARE IN NO HURRY TO KILL THEIR PREY.



THEY HOLD IT IN PLACE UNTIL THE REST OF THE PRIDE CAN CATCH UP TO THE KILL.

**Page Seven**

Desiree approaches an electronics store that says “Buy, Rent, Repair” on the marquis. The sign on the door indicates that it is closed, but she opens the door with a key. Once inside she walks past a calendar poster of a woman in a suggestive pose. Peering through the door behind the counter, she sees Issac doing pull-ups on a bar above his wheelchair. When he hears her critique of his form, he turns and smirks in mid pull-up.

Dialogue (Desiree to Issac): “All the way up, Marine.”

**Page Eight**

Issac settles into his chair and gestures that the item she needs is a box that is next to his computer terminal. She crosses the room to pick up the box and opens it. Within there is a file marked top secret and a handgun. She closes the lid and turns to Issac, who is wheeling her way and they converse. When Issac asks her a question she looks at him with a kind of incredulous expression and leaves with the box tucked under one arm.

Dialogue (Desiree): “Where is this order coming from?”

Dialogue (Issac): “I think that we are both better off not asking. You aren’t surprised?”

**Page Nine**

Faith is walking home from school when she notices that the heel of her Chuck Taylor Converse has broken away from the shoe in a long flap. She sits down on a curb and takes the shoe off to

see if she can fix it, chewing some gum and then trying to use it as a crude adhesive. Some of the girls from her school walk by her and laugh when they see her plight.

Narration (Nature Documentary) “One of the lionesses sustained a wound to one paw during the struggle with the gazelle. As a result she is slower catching up to the other lionesses, and if it affects her ability to hunt it may affect her status in the pride.”

### **Page Ten**

Desiree is looking at Faith’s photograph again, sitting right next to the top secret document. She takes a disposable mobile phone out of its packaging. She dials the phone and Sister Carmen answers a landline telephone at the group home.

Dialogue (Sister Carmen): “Hello?”

Dialogue (Desiree) “How is she?”

### **Page Eleven**

Desiree and Sister Carmen converse. While Desiree is looking at the picture of the man she is following leering up from her desk, Sister Carmen looks out the window to keep her eye on some of the teenagers from the home hanging out on the street.

Dialogue (Sister Carmen): “Desiree?”

Dialogue (Desiree): “No names. How is she doing?”

Dialogue (Sister Carmen): “She misses her mother. She isn’t back from school yet, which is unusual. She is getting poor grades, and she hasn’t been making many friends.”

Dialogue (Desiree): “My job is almost done. I may be able to see her soon.”

Dialogue (Sister Carmen): “Don’t wait too long. Kids... disappear into the system when they are here too long.”

### **Page Twelve**

Desiree looks stricken for a moment, saying nothing. Her mouth opens as if to speak but she puts her hand over her fist over her mouth. After she hears what Sister Carmen has to say, she hangs up the phone and throws it in a trash can. She looks back at the photo of her target and turns the picture of Faith upside down.

Dialogue (Sister Carmen): “I miss my sister too.”

Dialogue (Sister Carmen): “Hello? Are you still there?”

Narration (Nature Doc): “While every lioness is devoted to raising their cubs, the primary goal is survival, and the cub must grow strong enough to survive on its own.”

### **Page Thirteen**

Faith comes in through the door of the group home. Sister Carmen greets her and adjusts her clothing, asking her about the dirt on her face and her damaged shoe. Taking a look at the shoe she can see that it is a total loss, and sends Faith to the room she shares with three other girls to

do her homework. Faith sits down on her bed and stares at a poster on the wall depicting Mary holding a baby Jesus.

Dialogue (Sister Carmen): “There you are.”

Dialogue (Faith): “Hi Aunt Carmen.”

Dialogue (Sister Carmen): “Remember you have to call me sister here. You have dirt on your face. What happened to your shoe?”

Dialogue (Faith): “It just fell apart. I tripped.”

Dialogue (Sister Carmen) “You haven’t been having trouble with those girls again?”

Dialogue (Faith) “No. No trouble.”

Dialogue (Sister Carmen) “This can’t be fixed. Head on in to do your homework and I’ll see if I can find your size in the donations.”

## **Page Fourteen**

Desiree looks over the top secret folder that she has on her target. A few important bits of information jump out at her. One is that her target is selling information to the Chinese because he needs money to support his drug habit, and that he also uses the money to hire sex workers from an online message board.

Narration 1 (File Excerpt) “Subject has been observed picking up dead drops of high value currency from Chinese couriers.”

Narration 2 (File Excerpt) “electronic surveillance has noted high amounts of money spent on nude dancers, massage services and escorts.”

Narration 3 (File Excerpt): “Substantial drug abuse observed through HUMINT, with favored substances including cocaine and heroin.”

### **Page Fifteen**

Desiree is at a private outdoor firing range. She is wearing a sleeveless shirt and shooting glasses. She puts in earplugs and adjusts the sight of the pistol Issac gave her. She assumes the weaver stance and takes aim with a two handed grip. Firing three times, two of her bullets hit in the chest area of the target and the third hits the target in the head. She pulls the target back and looks at the results, seeing the disembodied smug smile of the man she is going to kill on the face of the target.

Onomatopoeia: “Blam Blam Blam”

Narration (Nature Doc): “The lioness is always hunting. Even when there is no prey in sight, she is always vigilant, using senses honed by countless centuries of evolution. No predator on the plains knows more about their prey, or is more prepared to stalk them through the grasslands.”

### **Page Sixteen**

Scene shifts to the beach house of Desiree’s target. He answers a knock at the door and Desiree is standing there in a sexy black dress. He invites her in and hands her an envelope. She sprinkles some cocaine on her hand, offering him the first snort. He obliges, but instantly grabs at his

throat and stumbles to his knees, than falls to the floor. Desiree wipes the remaining powder from her hand with a tissue.

Dialogue (Target): “Staci?”

Dialogue (Desiree) “That’s me.”

Dialogue (Target) “You’re beautiful as your pictures. Here’s your donation.”

Dialogue (Desiree) “Thank you. Do you mind?”

Dialogue (Target) “I didn’t know that you partied.”

Dialogue (Desiree) “Meeting new people always makes me a little nervous. Want some?”

Onomatopoeia: “Snort”

Narration (File Excerpt) “Subject’s medical records indicate a fatal allergy to peanuts.”

### **Page Seventeen**

Desiree pulls on a pair of nitrile gloves that she kept in her purse and takes the man’s pulse. His eyes are still open but it is clear that he is gone. She picks up his fallen phone and then goes into the kitchen. She takes a knife from the butcher block and uses it to pry open a panel at the bottom of the range and pull out the gas line.

### **Page Eighteen**

She punctures a small hole in the line and notes when it starts to hiss. Next, she places the smartphone on the counter and cracks the screen by stabbing it with the knife. She takes a moment to look at family portraits that are on the wall, showing pictures of the man happily playing with his children and hugging his wife.

Onomatopoeia: "Hisssssssssss"

### **Page Nineteen**

Desiree closes the front door behind her and walks away from the house. As she walks, she dials the number of the man's broken phone on her smart phone. She doesn't look back as the house explodes into flames behind her, windows belching flames and showers of broken glass flying everywhere.

Narration (Nature Doc) "Many have poetically called the Lion the king of the beasts, but as the Lionesses of the Serengeti plains have shown, their queens are truly the deadliest of the species."

### **Page Twenty**

Desiree enters her apartment and takes off her sexy dress before climbing into the shower, leaving the dress in a wastebasket next to the toilet. She wipes the steam off of the mirror and looks at herself. She focuses on her face for a moment, then looks away. Her smart phone lights up with a caller, and the ID reads "Issac." She tosses it into the wastebasket with the dress. Once again in street clothes, she walks to the bus terminal and boards a bus to Portland, Ore.

**Page Twenty One**

Desiree is outside a brownstone in suburban Portland. She looks to the sign and it says “St. Maria Group Home” She walks up to a window and peers inside to see Faith sitting alone on a ragged couch drawing in a notebook. She takes out the photograph and compares it to the girl on the couch, then a tear runs down her cheek. Faith is so much older than she thought.

**Page Twenty Two**

Faith notices something at the window and comes toward it, but when she looks out the window she sees nothing but a silhouette of Desiree walking away.

Narration (Nature Documentary): “Nature is unforgiving, and the perpetuation of life depends on all forms of life being true to their nature.”

END OF ISSUE

## A FRIEND IN DEED

David Shrauger

The alarm clock didn't go off.

Mike knew the moment that he opened his eyes and saw the daylight streaming through his window that his alarm had failed to go off. On any other day that would make him panic. He would scramble for his phone and call his boss in a state of desperation, apologizing profusely as he insisted that he was on his way. Today he had bigger concerns. He could always get another job, but would he ever get another best friend?

He reached for his bedside lamp, and nothing happened but an impotent click of the switch. When he looked to his alarm clock and saw the blank, black rectangle where red digits should have been, it was clear what had happened. The power was out, which wasn't surprising given the strength of the windstorm last night.

In his experience Mike Gladwin found that days had a way of ending the same way that they began, and if his rude awakening was any indication, he was in for a hell of a day. He forced himself out of bed, wincing at the pain from his left calf muscle. Last night, in the midst of a deep sleep, he had been struck with a vicious "charley horse." This happened from time to time, but he couldn't remember a time when it had been so intense. He remembered leaping out of bed in agony, limping and hopping around in an effort to walk off the cramp. The next thing he remembered was sitting in the bathtub with a splitting headache. He must have fallen in. Since he woke up in his bed, he must have risen and crawled back under the sheets. The pain was doing a good job of waking him up, maybe better than a stiff cup of coffee.

The morning was more of an adventure than it had to be. No warm water so he skipped his shower. He didn't have any clean underwear, he couldn't find his right shoe, and when he walked into his kitchen, he found that the refrigerator was leaking water all over the floor. He didn't even bother to open it.

He picked up his smartphone, which had somehow found its way into the sink next to an empty bottle of Jack. He had no idea how either of them had ended up there. When he tapped its cracked screen, he found that there were multiple missed calls from work, but only one text...from Simon.

Please, the text read.

Mike and Simon Harley were small-town boys who had grown into small-town men. Their mothers had taught them small-town manners—saying please and thank you, calling your elders sir and ma'am. Even on a day like this, the manners were not totally forgotten. Mike looked at the word on the screen, knowing everything that it meant and everything that it asked.

Once he was a little more put together, Mike opened his hall closet and looked at his hunting gear. Camo, rubber boots, rucksack, rifle case, reflective vest...it was all in order. He bundled it into the green duffel bag he brought back from the war. His truck was waiting but he had to bite back his profanity when he saw that he had left the driver's side window open. The bench seat was completely soaked. He threw his gear into the passenger side and sat down with a squish. There were worse things than a wet ass, and he had a friend in need.

As he drove down Highway 20, John Mellencamp's grainy voice insisted that he would probably die in a small town, and that is where they would bury him.

He had driven up the old back road to Deepest Lake a hundred times without incident, but he could never remember having this much trouble. He needed to stop half a dozen times to clear off fallen branches and saplings from the road. Every time his leg pulsed with pain, reminding him that he wasn't as young as he once was. One fallen branch was so heavy that he didn't think he would be able to move it, much less lift it. His leg throbbed with pain that matched his heartbeat as he pushed it through the soft mud on the shoulder. He was out of breath by the time he cleared the road, but part of him wished that he had failed. Part of him wished that he could just call Simon and tell him that they would have to do it another day. That wasn't an option, however, because his phone had lost its charge.

It may have been noon by the time Mike pulled into the gravel driveway on the north slope of Baron Hill. Without his phone to tell the time, he had no way of knowing. He had fallen out of the habit of wearing a watch or setting the clock on his car radio. He stalled for a moment, settling into the discomfort of his wet seat. He was reluctant to go to the porch and encounter what was waiting for him. Once he stepped onto the porch, he couldn't go back. He would have to do what had been asked of him.

He couldn't look forward so he looked over his shoulder. He saw the trail that went down to the lake and remembered the day that they went ice skating on the shallows, such a novelty in the mild winters of the Pacific Northwest. One of his happiest memories...right until the point that he broke through the ice. He never forgot who was there to pull him out of the deadly, freezing water. He never would forget.

The past had a way of clarifying things.

Mike got out of his truck and walked toward the house, but he didn't have a chance to knock. Simon was waiting for him, and the door swung open the moment he set foot on the porch. A yellowed eviction notice fluttered on the door. Simon stared out from the darkness with purple-ringed eyes.

“Come on in. Power is out up here, but I have coffee on the stove.”

Accepting the invitation was difficult. Mike would rather they be on their way, but small-town boys grew into small-town men with small-town manners.

They sat in the darkness together, drinking black coffee out of tin cups, but there wasn't much to say. Simon sat in his recliner, and Mike sat at the dinner table in front of a stack of past-due bills from Skagit Valley Hospital. The house was strewn with unfolded clothes and toys left behind by the children. A cracked picture-frame on the floor showed Simon with a pretty blonde woman who had given him pretty blonde children. They were probably living a pretty blonde life down in California. Mike took every drink of his coffee as if he were taking a big gulp, but instead he sipped and deeply inhaled its scent. The smell of sickness in the house was overpowering.

“Your hand steady today?” Simon asked as Mike helped him put on his hunting camo.

“Steady enough. I'll shoot straight.”

“Remember to use the rounds with the orange tips. They ain't legal, but if anybody asks, just tell them that I gave 'em to you.”

Mike's face scrunched up and he just nodded.

“What about your vest?” Mike asked as he buckled and snapped up his own hunting gear, nodding at the reflective vest that lay on the sofa.

“Don’t think I’ll be needing it. Better if I don’t have it. Fewer questions that way.”

They began their journey up the hill, past the overgrown cabin where local legend said that the eccentric Baron kept house with his Asian houseboy. It was the scandal of the county in those days, causing rumors and titters whenever he came down the hill to the valley farmers, looking for milk to mix with his inexhaustible supply of vodka. Mike and Simon walked by the cabin with their arms linked. With his throbbing leg, Mike needed help just as much as Simon did.

The trail that went up the hill was interrupted by a gate with a sign that said NO HUNTING. It was here that Simon had to stop, planting one hand on a tree for support as he vomited at its base. Mike moved to pat his back but pulled back his hand. He clenched it into a fist at his side.

“I think it’s time that I scout on up ahead,” Simon said, wiping some puke off of his bottom lip with his sleeve. “Remember to shoot straight.”

Simon stumbled down the trail, climbing over the gate with some difficulty. He began to stagger, stopping at every tree for support. At a certain point he stopped trying and became tangled in a bush. Mike loaded the rounds with the orange tips into his rifle. His hand wasn’t as steady as he had said, and it was difficult to press them down into the magazine.

Mike had fired his rifle hundreds of times in war and thousands of times on the rifle range. Never had he found it so hard to lift a weapon. He pulled it hard against the pocket of his

shoulder, looked down his sight post, and began to listen to his breathing. In, out, in, out, waiting for the pause between his breaths. When it came, he slowly squeezed the trigger.

He knew that he would never have another best friend...not if he lived to be a hundred years old.

THE END

## TRACKS

David Shrauger

When I was 11 years old me and my friends had a notion.

We had all watched movies where people jumped on moving trains and it looked so easy and yet dangerous at the same time. The trains came through our neighborhood several times a day, providing us with a source of constant temptation to prove our courage. All that it took was one double dare to put the entire thing into motion.

I can still hear the trains in the night sometimes. I can hear their mournful wail and feel their rumblings in my teeth, just like I did during the sleepless nights of my boyhood, even though I don't live within 50 miles of a train track.

Once we resolved to jump a train, nothing was going to stop us from attempting the feat. Brandon, Bryan, Garrett and myself must have waited half the day by the tracks just waiting for the cars to rumble by. We shuffled our feet and kicked up the dirt, twittling our thumbs like boys while mimicking the tough talk of men. If we had any trace of fear regarding what we were about to do, it was buried deep in the kind of false bravado that can only come in its purest form from the young and stupid.

When the trains finally came by, something seemed wrong. It was rumbling by a lot faster than usual, or at least seemed like it. It was far too late to chicken out, though. Garrett went first, hopping onto a tanker car and clinging to the runners. Unlike in the movies, there were no convenient open cargo box cars just waiting for us to jump into them. Then Brandon went, getting lucky by hopping between two cars and grabbing hold of a cable that was strung between

them. Two lucky jumps onto the train and our courage was soaring. We hadn't grown enough to know the most important thing about luck, and that is the fact that it runs out.

Since I went last, I was the only one who saw it. Brandon tried to hop on a flatbed car stacked with logs that were on their way to the mill, still wet and slimy from being dragged through the fallen forest. He made the jump, but couldn't gain any purchase on the slippery flatbed.

He fell. I ran.

I couldn't reach him before he fell under the car. Parts of him sprayed out and the rest of him was dragged along by the car. I kept running after him but I stopped when I came to the leg, just laying there without the rest of him. The other leg, I would later learn, somehow ended up on the other side of the track. I remember stepping over the leg, perhaps realizing that it was no longer a part of my friend. Maybe even a child brain knew there was no hope there, but there was some hope for Bryan. I saw Brandon running from the opposite direction, trying to reach the bushes where Brandon had come to rest. I slipped on some blood and fell down. I laid there for a moment, looking at the blood streaking the rails and a few fingers on the ground.

By the time I got up, Brandon was over Bryan screaming himself purple, although I could not hear the scream over the train. Brandon and Bryan were Irish twins, born less than a year apart. They were the closest brothers I had ever met, and Brandon's inconsolable screaming seemed to last for some time, although it could not have been more than a few seconds.

Bryan had no legs and one of his arms ended in a mangled mess. Breaking loose from the wheels of the train car had cost him. His eyes were wide open, still staring at the train as it sped by. His skin was the color of skim milk and his lips were cherry red. Blood spurted out of his

stumps in bursts, like when I used to stick my finger in the garden hose to spray down my sisters in our back yard. As I approached him, some of it got in my eyes.

That was when I pissed my pants.

In the years to come, the fact that I pissed my pants seemed to be the only part than anybody remembered. But I did two things that still bewilder me. First, I took off my belt and tied it around the stump of his right leg. It was a shitty tourniquet, but there was no good reason for me to know how to do it at all. I had only been shown how to do it once by my Boy Scout leader, and that was only during a first aid class that went off the rails when he began talking about his time in Nam. I pulled it as tight as I was able, then did the same to the other leg with Bryan's own belt. He was so out of it that he didn't even scream when I did it. Seeing what I was doing, Brandon snapped out of it and did the same for his brother's mangled hand.

The train continued on, carrying Garrett out of our story and into juvie when the sheriff eventually pulled him off the train car he had been clinging to like a treed raccoon.

Years later, Bryan spit in my face and then threw a beer can at the back of my head as I walked away from his wheelchair-bound carcass. Not because he blamed me for the accident, but rather because what I did forced him to live all the years since.

At least I learned the lesson early. You want gratitude? Buy a dog.

\*\*\*

It sure is funny how you can put things out of your head for years only to realize that they never left you at all, they were always there, just waiting for their chance to burst free.

I can still taste the sand in my mouth. At 25 years old I am caked with it, a dry paste covering every inch of exposed skin. I am blinking it out of my eyes and snorting it out of my nose. I learned quickly not to bother to spit it out, because it didn't make a difference. Spit all day and all that happened is that you get thirsty. The taste remains well past its welcome.

On the third day of the sandstorm the mortar shells started falling on our position. At first we put on our pro masks every time we heard an impact, but as the days turned into weeks and then months we ceased to give a shit. If Haji had chemical weapons they would have used them by then. Hell, by that point most believed they never had any WMDs in the first place.

In this memory of a memory I am in a bunker but I am not safe. I should know because I built it myself out of sandbags and wet sand. Good enough to stop a bullet but all but useless against a mortar shell. One good hit would turn it into a mushroom cloud of sand and gore. At 25 I am the old man. I am the sergeant. Everyone around me is scared kids looking to me for bravery. I can't give them that, so I can only hope the next best thing is enough.

I show no emotion at all. No emotion looks an awful lot like no fear. As the shells and RPGs continue to rain down through the sandstorm the kids start to fall apart. A female soldier sobs in the corner. The walls shudder with another impact and a cloud of stinking dust fills the bunker. A soldier asks me how I can be so calm while another pukes in the corner.

I am not calm. I look calm. There is a difference, but I am not going to explain it to him. Still waters run deep, so to speak. In that moment I have as much fear, if not more, as every shuttering and puking private in my charge. I just don't have the luxury of showing it. I imagine myself on the ground, in pieces. Leaking all over and pale as a glass of milk, lips blue as the sky opening and closing like a goldfish out of water. I think that all that it would take is one singular

insurgent to pull their shit together and we will all be in pieces, and I know what those pieces will look like.

“Sergeant,” Private Green whispers to me. “Do you think that we can put him outside? He is upsetting the girls.”

I look down at the corpse staring up at me. One eye seems to be looking at nothing while the other glares right at me. Specialist Graham had been running to the bunker, and almost made it. His interceptor vest had saved his life, but that turned out to be a brief respite. His legs had been blown off at the knee, and when we tried to take off his vest to stop the bleeding his intestines ruptured through a wound in his abdomen. He couldn't hold them in and we couldn't stop the bleeding. I screamed into the radio for help, but the ineptly named Camp Victory insisted that they could not medivac him because of the weather. He lasted almost an hour. If it wasn't for the sandstorm, they could have treated him in 20 minutes.

I don't want to talk. I had already screamed myself hoarse through the radio. My trachea feels like it's been sandblasted. I look down at the loop of intestines piled on top of his torso, coated with sand like powdered sugar on a doughnut. Put on a brave face, Sergeant. Pretend that you can't smell what Graham ate for lunch.

“Come on, Sergeant... the girls are upset.”

I grab a hold of his collar and pull him closer. I am out of line, but I don't care.

“Look at them,” I growl.

He complies.

“We don't have any girls in this bunker,” I rasp at him “Those are soldiers.”

I pull him so he has no choice but to look down.

“This is a soldier. Soldiers die, but they’re still soldiers. I will not throw him out like garbage.”

“Yes Sergeant.”

I release my grip on his collar, but he keeps looking down.

“Get it straight. If you can’t handle it please let me know. They need plenty of bodies for field sanitation detail back on Victory to burn all that Fobbit shit. You can tell your kids when they asked what you did during the war that you stirred the colonel’s flaming turds while real soldiers risked their necks.”

I say this all in a low voice, but it’s a small bunker. I know that I have to say something to them now. I’m not going to bother to give the female soldiers the “no crying in baseball” speech. They have plenty to cry about, not the least of which being that they all have urinary tract infections that I can smell across the bunker. We ran out of toilet paper days ago, even the tiny wads that come in MREs. Richest, most well equipped Army in the world and we can’t even figure out how to wipe our own asses. All that aside, I have to say something.

“It’s as good a day to die as any. Haji’s out in that storm with sand in their eyes firing blind. Couldn’t see shit if it landed on their face. Trying to do trigonometry when they never learned to read. So tighten it up. Act like soldiers. We all had our reasons for coming this far, but no matter how stupid they are they must have been worth dying for.”

I know how badly I suck at motivational speeches. Somehow it works. The crying stops. The puking stops. Then another shell hits and something ruptures inside me. My bladder releases

and urine stains a muddy patch on the front of my DCU pants. I feel it running down my leg and know that there is no way it won't be noticed.

Still waters run deep.

The mood in the bunker changes. Everybody is trying to hold in their laughter and succeeding only in making flatulent noises. Nobody wants to be the first one to laugh at the sergeant, so I save them the trouble and laugh at myself. Something inside breaks free when everyone in the bunker follows suit.

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Years later I am home and I am drunk. There is no one to call. I don't have a platoon sergeant or a first sergeant anymore. No one to call and no one I care to talk to. Nothing to do but hop in my car and cause a catastrophe. Even as drunk as I am, I'm not that stupid. The car keys in my pocket might as well be a pack of gummy bears for how useful they are. The fancy phone I bought is out of charge, dead as Specialist Graham. I begin to walk but I don't know where I'm going. It doesn't really matter anyway. I have nowhere to go. Nowhere to be. No mission. I know that I have no place here with these people. I might as well be back in the desert, and no matter how much I drink I'm still thirsty.

The rain is falling straight down. Fine Seattle weather. I stumble through the city at night. Nobody speaks to me and I speak to no one. Nobody sees me. Nobody cares. What shame is there in being drunk or falling to the ground when everyone around you is drunk or stoned? The night is a bacchanalia of disorder and derangement of the senses. It would only be a shame to be sober. If the Army taught me nothing else, it was the importance of camouflage. I do eventually walk out of it, onto the quieter streets down by the water.

On Second Avenue there is a monument to the soldiers who lost their lives in various conflicts. I didn't intend to visit but since I see it I take the opportunity to snap old glory a brief salute. That is when I see the homeless man limping up to the monument and unzipping his fly. I am not sure whether to be incensed or incredulous as he begins taking a leak. Urine flows down over the names of the fallen. There was a time, not so long ago, when I would have stomped a hole in his skull just to see if he actually had shit for brains. However, I can't do that because I can't stop laughing.

He must hear my dry, brittle laughter because his piss stops in midstream. He turns around and looks a little scared. I have that effect on people. I can tell from his face that he has been hit, probably a lot. But at the end of the day all that he was pissing on was a rock. When it comes to the names on the stone, the real damage has already been done. I pull him into a friendly hug. He smells like shit, but I've smelled worse. I give him the money in my wallet. A couple hundred dollars. I don't count it. I tell him to get someplace warm and dry out. He starts to cry as I walk away.

I am not a sergeant anymore. I am not anything, really. The only difference between me and the sobbing man I leave at the piss-soaked monument is that I have some paper that says I'm worth something.

I wander down by the train tracks, and hunker down. I put the palm of my hand on the tracks and feel the vibration that heralds a train on its way. I ignore the dark voice that tells me to just lay down on the rails and get this shit show over with. Instead I lay down next to the tracks. I have been drinking like a fish throughout this bender, but I haven't slept in three days. I lay down in cold wet dirt that is flirting with being mud. It still seems more comfortable than my bed at home, and certainly more welcoming than the woman I married before the war. I feel the

vibrations and know that it is coming. When it rumbles past I stare at the wheels. There is something soothing in those merciless wheels tearing past. There is comfort to be found in the wail of the horn, in the knowledge that you are so very close to something that can destroy you yet are completely safe.

I close my eyes and begin to feel the drift. The drift toward sleep and dreams. I am not sure which of the two claim me first. When I was a boy I had dreams about being a soldier, now I have nightmares that I'm still a soldier. I feel comfortable for the first time in a long time. Somehow, some way, fear is more of a comfort than love ever was.

## THE SUMMER PEOPLE

David Shrauger

There are a lot of stories circulating about the day that my father died. One of the most famous among my extended family comes from my sister, who was only five. She was judged too young to get the news, but she says that she didn't need to be told. She knew because she looked through a crack in the door and saw her mom and brother, neither of whom she had ever seen cry before, crying like the world had just ended. For most people, a day like that feels like an ending. Looking back at it, I realize that it was my first day on the job.

But we'll get back to that. For now, I have to tell you about the summer people.

The first time I ever saw the summer people in the wintertime was December of 1996. I had returned from my pull in the Persian Gulf some months before and hung my dirty desert uniform in the closet. It would hang there reeking of desert until about 2001, when my unit was activated again in the wake of 9/11. But that too is a story for another time. I was 22 years old and living alone on the property. The price of my independence was that I lived exclusively in the boat house and rented out the estate to vacationers.

For the last few years I had rented to two different families; the ones that I called the summer people – who dwelled in the big house between early May and late August – and the autumn people who arrived for a few weeks around Thanksgiving. However, it was unusual for anyone to show any interest in renting during the winter months. The beachfront estate overlooking Skagit Bay was scenic in the warmer months, but during winter it was surrounded with a muddy patch pounded with rain and tormented by blustery winds that howled through the

inlet. Every so often I got inquiries from military families – usually those of flag officers stationed at the Naval Air Station – to rent year-round or buy it outright, but I was adamant that it was a vacation property. It was virtually my only source of income. Well, not totally, but we will get to that later.

I was surprised to see her on the porch that night, only noticing a glow of a cigarette on the porch when I was taking out the garbage. A few lights had been on in the house, but only on the side facing the rough road that traveled up the hill toward Highway 20. As I approached I saw Sophie breathing out a cloud of smoke mixed with vapor from the cold. She saw me and her face made a brave impression of a smile.

“Hi Brandon,” she said before she took another drag.

“Sophie. Nice night.”

“Cold as hell,” she said while exhaling. Her nose was a red cherry above a smear of black lipstick and two tributaries of mascara streaked down her cheeks. Her thin leather biker jacket didn’t look like it provided much in the way of warmth. I took off my coat and offered it but she shook her head.

I had known Sophie as a rebellious teenager, a little older than me, but now she was a young woman whose teenage affectations had overstayed their welcome a bit. I wondered for a moment if she hadn’t just swiped her parent’s key to the place and brought her friends there to party. That didn’t matter to me so much. I knew where to send the bill, for rent or for damages. Something in the way she looked back at me told me that wasn’t the case. It was clear that she was stricken with something. I had enough experience with grief to know when the bastard had shown up and made himself at home.

“I know that we aren’t supposed to be here. We didn’t know where else to go,” she said.

“What happened?”

“It was a fire...” she began calmly, but like a cloudburst from the sky the tears ran down her cheeks and her voice failed her.

She turned away from me and choked out “They... in there.”

Seeing the door was open, I walked into the kitchen. I could see the remainder of the family – mother Madeline and the younger kids Joe, Stephanie and Andy – huddling on the couch close to the fireplace. The father of the clan, Keith, was missing. If that didn’t tell me everything, the misery in the room did.

“Maddie?”

“He’s gone,” she said “Keith’s gone.”

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The last week my father was alive he taught me how to be a man.

Monday he taught me how to fight. He said it was best to get the most unpleasant part out of the way first.

“You keep your damn thumb out of your fist,” he told me “you’ll break your damn thumb that way. When you punch, aim at their eyes, nose or mouth. You hit them in any of those places you don’t have to hit too hard to hurt them. And you shouldn’t hit hard. Hands aren’t meant to hit people. Make sure that you hit with these two knuckles, right here. They are the least likely to break.”

He let me hit him in the palm of his hand a few times, and I found out that he was right. Punching hurt. I liked the wrestling moves he taught me next a whole lot better. Arm lock, choke hold, leg lock etc. It was a little more like playing, and play was pretty much all my seven-year-old brain could process.

“Now I am going to have to hit you,” he said as he held me by one shoulder “You know that I don’t hit you just to hurt you or punish you, and I am not hitting you because you did anything wrong. You just have to know what it is like. You can’t win a fight if you are scared of getting hit, and you can’t just go around hitting people without knowing what it’s like to get hit.”

I nodded to him, but I was scared.

“This is going to hurt you more than it hurts me.”

The punch was brutal. It knocked out one of my loose baby teeth and I fell backward to collide with the hard ground. There was blood in my nose, blood in my mouth and one of my eyes wouldn’t open.

“Don’t cry now,” Dad said as he stood above me. “Boys don’t cry. Never let them see you cry. You just get up and hit back. You hear me? Get up and hit back.”

I did as I was told.

On Tuesday he took it a little easier on me, probably because of the shouting match he had with my mother the night before about my bloody nose and black eye. In the morning he taught me how to shave.

“Always shave in one long stroke.” He demonstrated with his real razor as I copied what he was doing with one that was lacking a blade. “Always shave in the direction of your chin. Don’t let the blade shake or you will cut yourself.”

He took me with him to the barber shop, and made sure that I got a proper man’s haircut. We went to buy some clothes as well, and he told me that the best way to know how to dress wasn’t to look at your friends, but to look at the store mannequins. Clothes made the man, but what was appropriate men’s dress changes with the times. Not as fast as women’s clothes, though. A man should shop for clothes only once a year, but women’s fashion changed every three months. Outside the store we sat on the curb and he showed me how to shine new shoes, heating up the Kiwi wax with a lighter to put on a nice base-coat hard as dried nail polish.

“Nobody will take you seriously if you have fucked-up footwear,” he told me “Wear tennis shoes for as long as you can, but men wear shoes that you have to polish.”

He took off his watch and gave it to me. It was a metal Timex and I tried to put it on but it was fitted to his wrist and it hung around mine like a bracelet. He laughed a little as I held up my hand and it slid all the way down to my elbow.

“It will fit someday. Remember this... men wear watches. Never leave home without your watch.”

I did as I was told.

On Wednesday it got a little tougher again. He packed us up and took us into the woods after dark. He held a flashlight while I put up the tent and then talked me through starting a fire with a little piece of flint rock and a dime. It took a while, and the moon came out, but he was patient. He told me scary stories, war stories, and shaggy dog stories. We roasted some

marshmallows, and he told me that the most important part was to keep turning them. Cook one side too long and it would fall right off the stick. We were out there so he could teach me how to hunt. He said that nighttime was the best time to hunt, but dangerous. Hunt at night and you have to stick together, hip to hip at all times. When the fire burned down to coals we climbed up into the hunting blind and he told me to keep an eye on a nearby field where a lot of clover and blackberry bushes grew. It wasn't too long until I saw the silhouette of a buck in the moonlight. He had me pick up the 12 gauge and take aim, but even though the sight post was right on the buck I didn't want to shoot it.

“Go ahead. Pull the damn trigger,” Dad whispered.

I did as I was told.

I fired, but the buckshot went high and the buck ran off. “That’s okay,” he told me with a chuckle “It’s a long way past deer season anyway.”

If another deer came along we were not awake to see it. We slept right there in the hunting blind.

Thursday was a sports day. After washing up from the camping trip we headed out to the park and he instructed me in everything he said I needed to be a sports legend. He showed me exactly where to hold the bat and threw fastballs. He showed me where to put my fingers on the threads when I was going to throw a football. He showed me the footwork that I would need to play soccer, and bounced the ball off my head so I wouldn't be afraid when an air ball was flying toward me. He tried to show me how to make a basketball jump shot, but I was too short and the ball couldn't reach the rim.

“Some things you just can’t do until you’re bigger,” Dad said “That’s a good lesson to learn. Just promise me when you grow a little bit you will come back here and make that shot.”

I did as I was told.

Friday was a little strange. My mother had noticed how much time he was spending with me this week and insisted that he take my sister Christmas shopping for last minute gifts.

“Homework for you today,” Dad said “Listen to your mom. Help her around the house. If she wants you to wash the dishes or fold the clothes, don’t give her any lip. She works really hard to keep this place straight and you need to do your part. We’ll talk when I get back.”

When Dad returned, burdened with wrapped gifts, my sister was crying because there were so many toys that she wanted that they had bought for other children in the family. My mom berated him for a bit, asking him why he had to make her cry.

“She has to learn,” Dad said “Sometimes you have to sacrifice to show people that you love them.”

Dad sat down with me and we watched television. He drank a whole six pack and let me have a few sips from the last can.

“What did you learn today?” he asked.

I didn’t know what to say. I tried to put Palmolive liquid soap in the dishwasher and the machine had spewed soap suds everywhere. I had learned to mop the suds up, and to use powdered soap.

That got a laugh out of dad.

“Pay attention now. I need to tell you about girls and women.”

I paid as much attention as I could. I was still of the opinion that they were icky.

“Women aren’t hard to figure out. You tell the dumb ones how smart they are and you tell the ugly ones that they’re pretty. You treat the whores like ladies and treat the ladies like whores. If you like their tits complement their blouse. If you like their ass ask them where they got their skirt, or pants or whatever. Their eyes are always pretty and their hair is always something you love. That is important. Tell them you love their hair, but never tell them that you love them. Never that. Tell them that and they’re got you, and they will tear a piece out of you. Women are like a bus. There will be another one around every 15 minutes and they will pick up everybody that pays the fare. They will never wait for you. Never let one inside your head and especially never let them get into your heart. You feel that butterfly feeling in your stomach or your heart skip a beat, you run like hell. You’ll think that the feeling is love, but really it is the same instinct that makes lemmings jump off of cliffs and makes whales beach themselves. Love your family, love your country, and fuck your girlfriends.”

I did as I was told.

Saturday the entire family was together. We took a drive together and rode a ferry to Seattle early in the morning and tried to hit every landmark and attraction. The Space Needle, the Aquarium and the Science Center as well as the underground stuff and the Museum. We even got to ice skate a little at the rink they set up at the Seattle Center. We were creatures of the Pacific Northwest, so not a one of us knew what we were doing. My sister was too scared to let go of mom’s leg and I must have fallen to the ice 20 times. Even after all the bruises it was probably the best day I can remember having. That night he tucked me in and kissed me on the cheek. That was odd for him, as he was not the most emotionally demonstrative of men.

“One day you are going to be a father too. Remember that your kids are the most important thing in the world. Put everything before them, even before yourself. It is the reason that we were put here on the planet. Promise me that you will do your best.”

I did as I was told.

Sunday was the last day that my father was alive. He took us to the Christmas Eve morning mass and made sure that we stood when we were supposed to stand and sat when we were supposed to sit and knelt when we were supposed to kneel. He read to us from the missal and made us repeat the words that everybody chanted out loud. We really didn't go to church that often, not even on Easter, and Mom was scowling the entire time. Dad was the only one to go and take communion, because we children hadn't taken first communion and mom was an atheist anyway. After the service dad talked with me on the church steps. He knelt down so that we could see eye to eye.

“I don't know if there is a God. Nobody does, but you will run into plenty of people that are absolutely sure one way or another. They are both idiots, and neither can prove the other wrong any more than they can prove themselves right. But I would like if you made up your mind yourself. Your mom won't like it, but listen to that little still voice inside you and decide what works for you in a spiritual sense. I think people need it, if just to go to sleep at night after the decisions they have to make during the day. You need faith in something, even if that something puts you on your knees talking to thin air.”

He walked me toward the Parrish graveyard as my mom and sister spoke with their friends on a nearby sidewalk, and we visited Grandfather Jimmy, Great Grandfather Clive and my Uncle Steve.

“Three generations of our family have served in the Marine corps. My grandpa at Belleau Wood, my dad at Peleliu, and your uncle at Khe Sanh. I hated every minute of it and I kissed the dirt at the airport when I came home, but I loved my brother with all my heart and I will never forget the day I got the news that he... didn't make it. I would have traded places with him if I could. Some would say that our family has given enough, and they may be right, but if families like ours don't do it nobody else is going to. One day it will be your turn to decide, but promise me one thing. When you turn 18 you go to the post office and sign up for selective service. It is something every man has to do. You don't ever have to put on a uniform if you don't want to, but you have to do that much.”

I did as I was told.

That evening my dad disappeared. He had rented an old storage unit close to the base, and spent the evening putting down plastic sheets on the floor and duct taping them to the ceiling so he wouldn't make a mess. He dressed up in those clothes that we bought when we were shopping, right down to the well-shined loafers. He left an envelope with enough cash to pay for what clean up would be required and a note apologizing for the inconvenience to the owners of the unit. Then he picked up the 12 gauge we used to hunt the deer and put the barrel in his mouth. He kicked off one shiny shoe and pulled the trigger with his toe.

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A few days into the winter of the summer people I got the phone call from Norman, the local funeral director. We had an unconventional business relationship that had gone back a few years. It had developed naturally at first, as we met up quite a few times at the national cemetery where local service members were laid to rest. I had served as flag detail a few times for my

reserve unit and even attended a few funerals for buddies of mine from the base who bit the big one in a variety of mishaps ranging from drunk driving to falling overboard. One day Norman asked if I would take a gig as a mourner at an undersized funeral for a small payment. I told him no, but I might take a big payment. It was the beginning of a less than beautiful friendship. When I saw his name on the caller ID I knew right away what it was about.

“The answer is no.”

“I haven’t even asked you yet,” Norman protested weakly.

“You never call me just to shoot the breeze.”

“This time you have to do it, Brando,” he insisted “These folks aren’t local. They don’t have a soul to come to the service except you.”

“They rent my property, Norm. I know these people and if they wanted me there they would have asked.”

“Just give it some thought. They are really laying down the green for this one even though it’s a closed casket. I am more than willing to share.”

It is easy to stand on principle when you have something to stand on. I looked at the open mail on my tiny dinner table and saw the latest property tax bill. I didn’t have to look at my leave and earning statement from the Marine Reserves to know that my drill pay wasn’t going to cut it. The pay I earned while I was overseas dried up faster than I thought it would, and I hadn’t had the heart to ask the summer people for a dime of rent. It was clear that if I wanted to hang on to the property that had come at the price of two parents I would have to say yes.

“Dress blues or civvies?” I grumbled into the phone.

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I learned the full story from my mom years later. I don't know if any of it is true, but I think that we all settle on a narrative that makes our life make sense sooner or later. She told me that my father had gone to the doctor after some fierce headaches and gotten a diagnosis of a terminal, inoperable brain tumor. He promptly decided that he was going to get a second opinion and insisted that the doctor give him his entire medical file so that he could take it to another physician. The thing was, he never did take that file to another doctor. Instead, he burned it in an old 50 gallon drum with some gasoline. With that accomplished, he walked into half of a dozen life insurance offices over the next few days.

The stories that all the adjusters told matched up. He would get the quote but he would read every line of the fine print on the policy with a magnifying glass. Inevitably, he would find one line that that he couldn't agree with. He would never say what, but he handed it back to them unsigned and walked out the door. There were no shortages of life insurance salesmen squirming around military bases. It was all too easy to convince service members of their own mortality and gouge them on the premiums because of their dangerous occupations. Finally, he found one that suited him and purchased a million dollar policy. The premiums were ruinous, but he would only pay them for one month.

After Dad was discovered in the storage unit on the day after Christmas, the life insurance company tried to deny the claim based on suicide, but found that the policy as signed was missing that clause. Then they sent an investigator to determine if they could deny based on pre-existing conditions. The autopsy was no help because a shotgun blast had turned the evidence into a Jackson Pollack painting on the ceiling of a storage unit. Besides, they needed to prove not only that Dad was sick but that he knew he was a goner. They found the doctor that

diagnosed the cancer, but he lacked any paperwork to prove his claims in court, and that is exactly where mom took them. It took a couple years, one of which we spent living with my grandmother after the house was foreclosed, but the insurance company had no choice but to pay up. One million dollars, plus interest and less lawyer fees.

So that was the story about how we paid off all the debts left in the wreckage of my father's life and bought a scenic piece of beachfront property on Whidbey Island that would, for a time, be a home. The question of how much my mom knew and when she knew it will never be answered, because one fateful day in 1989 she found a lump in her breast.

Life has a funny way of having no sense of humor.

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The reason why I was such a popular mourner for Norman's funeral service is because I had a special talent. I never cried. Ever since the day that I got the news about my dad, that part of me that cried had taken a permanent vacation. It was the kind of emotional lobotomy that can set in after crying for a week straight, all the while having every one of your relatives tell you – over and over – that you have to be brave because you are the man of the family now. However, that moratorium on crying didn't necessarily apply to tears. Those things your eyes just make regardless of how you feel. I found out pretty early in life that I had a fearful allergy to onions. While fresh cut onions will make just about anybody cry, just rubbing one on a handkerchief and smelling it an hour or two later was sufficient to make me tear up. Norman said that my quiet, manly tears really sold at his funerals, especially when I wore the uniform.

The summer people were surprised to see me at first, but it soon became clear that they were glad that it wasn't just the five of them. They all were dressed in identical black, and even

Sophie had cleaned up and wore an appropriate dress. I arrived a little late, just as the service was starting, and had opted not to wear the uniform. After my time in the desert, I was sick and tired of wearing uniforms anyway. It was an episcopal service in the swanky gated cemetery that adjoined the national cemetery. The plots were usually open only to the founding families of local townships such as Oak Harbor and Coupeville, but money talks even in the afterlife.

It was an unusual service. The priest's eulogy lacked platitudes and was filled with off-the-cuff remarks that showed a genuine closeness with the man in the closed casket.

“Keith was a big man in stature, but he loomed even larger in the hearts of the ones who loved him. That man we knew could make anybody laugh. He didn't have a mean bone in his body and he would give the shirt off his back just to see a smile. Even his pranks weren't all that mean spirited, and I should know because he pulled a fast one on my last April Fool's Day. But that good nature wasn't the only thing that made him an extraordinary man. He loved his family, his home, and he loved God. Many people will wonder about the way that I died, but we all know the way that he lived for all of us.”

The echo in the nearly-empty chapel made it resonate with a greater meaning, and I found myself in tears before the family was. That was strange, because I usually didn't start squeezing out the tears until closer to the end of the service. When Sophie saw me wiping at my eyes, her mascara began to run and then the crying spread like a grease fire.

I had gone home alone, just as I had come, sneaking off when they were speaking with the funeral director. I usually stuck around for a bit, but this one made me feel uncomfortable and my eyes burned a little more than normal. I needed to lay down in the dark after a good dose of eye drops. That wasn't meant to be, though.

I didn't often get visitors at the boat house. Hell, I have problems remembering ever getting one. So when there was a knock at the door I took a moment to figure out if it was just my imagination. A second knock got me on my feet.

When I opened the blinds of the sliding glass door I saw Sophie standing out there, still dressed in her beautiful funeral attire with her leather jacket hanging over her shoulders. I opened it and she stood there silently for a moment, looking at her feet.

"Do you mind if I come in?" she asked.

"Not at all."

The boat house wasn't very big, but I had a mostly empty living room with a couch and a recliner. She chose the couch so I sat down on the recliner, although I didn't kick up my feet. Sometimes it is hard to make yourself at home even in your own home.

"I just wanted to thank you for coming today. You didn't have to, but it meant the world to my mom," Sophie said.

"I didn't know him very well, but I just wanted to say goodbye."

"All of this... it used to be where your family lived?"

"Well, yes. But my mom passed away a few years ago, and my sister married a sailor. They are living in Hawaii now. The old place is too big for just me. I don't need much space."

"I know you don't know me very well, but can I ask you a favor?" Sophie asked while she picked at her fingernail polish.

"Sure"

“Can I stay here tonight? With you? I just can’t... there are too many memories in that house.”

“I know just how you feel.”

She didn’t seem to mind that there was only the one bed.

So I laid there in the dark with Sophie in my arms, finding out far too late that she snored like a chainsaw. I had a great deal of time throughout that sleepless night to wonder why the day had affected me so much more than the dozens of funerals before. It was only then that I realized what it was. In my rush to get to the funeral on time I had forgotten my onion handkerchief.

When the check from Norman showed up in the mail the next week, I wrote “return to sender” and threw it back in the box.

THE END

## MESSAGE STATUS

David Shrauger

Sam awoke with a smile, just like he did every day.

He brushed his teeth with a smile, tied his tie with a grin, and drank his morning cup of Joe through a smirk.

He had spent a good part of the night writing love letters. Introductions to the ladies of a website for the lovelorn, complete with its own iPhone app for quick, discreet meets. He preferred to write letters, as he called them. Actually taking the time to communicate rather than deciding to press the little star intended to let women know that you dig them.

Not that it did him any good. The message status was always the same.

“Unread Deleted.”

He checked another

“Unread Deleted.”

Still having hope, he checked a third.

“Unread Deleted,” read the message status.

If he was disappointed, his smile didn’t show it.

He closed the app with a swipe of his thumb and put the smartphone in his pocket. Love.com would have to wait because it was time for work,

Tightening the knot on his tie, he walked to his car at a brisk pace. It was a late-model sedan, hardly the kind of car he had dreamed of, but it got good gas mileage. His job called for him to burn almost as much tire rubber as it did shoe leather.

“So where is my first stop?” he thought aloud. He found himself doing that more and more as the years went on.

The itinerary called for him to drive to the east side today. Issaquah. Traffic on I-90 was going to be murder. He tucked his smartphone into its Bluetooth mount and switched to its GPS app. He knew the way until he got off the interstate, but Issaquah only seemed to have three roads and none of them went anywhere. He didn't want to be driving in circles.

He was predictably stuck in traffic on Madison when he got his first phone call of the day. If today was like any other day, it wouldn't be the last.

“Hi Henry,” he answered.

“Sam. What's the status on Walden?”

“I'm in route on Walden.”

“Menendez?”

“I've got him on my itinerary. Is he a priority?”

“His date is coming up. I want it done.”

“Roger that.”

If there was one thing that Sam could do, it was take an order. If his time in uniform had taught him nothing else, it taught him that.

“Just get them both done today. Farmer and Brown aren’t going to be nearly as easy. Philippa is already sitting on Walden, so hurry up. He gets antsy when he’s kept waiting.”

“Don’t I know it.”

Well, at least now Sam had something to look forward to at the end of the drive.

He managed to fight his way through the I-90 in record time. Just under an hour.

“Took you long enough,” Philippa said when he got out of the car.

“Just long enough,” Sam said through his smile.

“You’re in luck. The guy just stepped out of the office for an early lunch. Great to be in the 1% huh? One of our guys got thrown out of his office yesterday.”

“Don’t worry. You know I always get them.”

Philippa laughed at that “Yes you do.”

Sam and Philippa went in separately. Sometimes he felt bad for the guy, ambushing him in the middle of lunch, but by the time they called in Sam they had already tried everything else. Philippa took a table at the bar, mere feet from the man in the picture. Sam wouldn’t even bother with that pretense.

He walked through the restaurant, ignoring the few people that gawked at him as he went by. There was always a couple. Walden was at a table with two other men with depressingly similar taste in suits. He walked right up to the man’s table and looked him in the eye.

Walden, like everybody, looked at his smile.

“Theodore Walden?” he asked, knowing the answer, but the niceties had to be observed.

“Yes?” Walden stammered.

“You’ve been served,” Sam said, pulling the envelope out of his coat and dropping it in the salad.

“Witnessed,” Philippa said.

Walden began stammering, but Sam didn’t give a shit. He executed an about face and marched on out. His job was done. Philippa followed, but unlike Sam she was holding her hand under her nose to hold in a giggle.

“Never fails,” Philippa said when they got to their cars. “They always possum up the second they see you.”

Filly always had a country-fried way of putting things. He rain his hand through his bristly crew cut and shook his head a little, but his smile was going nowhere.

“Just lucky I guess, like you said.”

His phone chimed. Another message on the app.

“Unread Deleted,” the message status read.

“You know... you don’t have to use those stupid sites. I have some friends who would...”

“That’s my business.”

“But there are people who understand... what you did in the war...”

“Philippa. It’s my business,” Sam said in a tone that would never come with a smile.

“Fine.”

As he drove away he regretted snapping at her, but he didn’t discuss personal matters with anyone, ever.

According to his itinerary, Menendez worked at Software firm in Bellevue. At least it wasn’t a long drive. He was curious to see that he was the first to attempt to serve him. That hardly ever happened.

He called Henry.

“Menendez doesn’t look like a dodger,” Sam said. “What’s the story?”

“No story. Everybody else was busy.”

“Yeah.”

“That doesn’t sound like you believe me.”

“Doesn’t matter. I’m the only one who will do it, huh?”

“That’s right.”

“Then that’s all I need to know.”

As a process server, Sam had learned that every service was different. Most were bankruptcy, lawsuits, and small-claims bullshit. Other ones didn’t go down so easy.

When he arrived in Bellevue, Paul was whistling, leaning up against his car.

“What was the rush? Don’t you know I get paid by the hour?”

Sam genuinely laughed at that. A retired cop like Paul would be content to sit in his car all day eating donuts.

“It was a short drive. What’s the scoop?”

“Easy as pie. Guy’s a security guard. Works the front desk.”

Fish in a barrel. That confirmed his suspicions.

“Let’s get this over with.”

As they walked into the front lobby, he saw a lone dark-haired man working the desk. The man stood up as they approached, picking up a clipboard.

Sam sized him up. Couldn’t help it. The Guy was well over six foot, nasty scar on his neck, U.S. Marines pin on his uniform. Most of all, he had a pistol on his hip.

He looked at the smile, like everybody else, but his expression was different. That made this a little harder.

“John Menendez?”

“That’s me.”

“You’ve been served.”

“Witnessed,” Paul said.

They walked away, through a lobby that was suddenly inconveniently long. In its echo chamber he could hear the envelope being torn open. Then he could hear the sobs.

“Divorce papers,” Paul said as the door closed behind them. “Some cry, some laugh.”

Sam just smiled.

“Were do you think the old lady is? Mom’s house? Battered woman’s shelter? In Barbados trying to break the dick-sucking record?”

“Doesn’t matter.”

“You know what, Sam? I’ve never met a harder guy to get a laugh out of. Lighten up.”

As he walked away, Sam’s iPhone chimed again. He had another message status update.

“Read Deleted.”

“Well, that’s progress.”

He sat down in his car and checked out the next stop on his itinerary when the sound of the gunshot made him flinch. He turned to the building and waited a moment. Only one shot. He was certain what that meant. The sound instantly brought back the feelings of the round ripping through his face, what a surprise it had been. In one cheek and out the other. Knocked out his wisdom teeth. One inch lower and it would have blown out his tongue. The doctors did everything they could, but they called it a Glasgow smile. The muscles were just gone and would never come back. One inch higher, and he wouldn’t have come back.

He looked in the rearview mirror to straighten his tie. Sometimes, when the mirror just caught the bottom half of his face, it really did look like he was smiling. It was the eyes that gave him away.

**ESC**

David Shrauger

Diane was late, and her heart pounded her ribs as her heels clicked and clacked up the cement stairs of MomInc.com. She couldn't afford to be late again, not after last week. She was slowly and surely running out of excuses.

The Seattle traffic had not disappointed in its dismal shittiness. It had in fact impressed her with its heartless atrociousness. It was like hell woke up one day and decided it was only going to roll between Evergreen Point and Beacon Hill. She was purposefully going up the back stairs, past where the photo studios and the wardrobe department were much too busy to notice anyone. When she filled in her timesheet tomorrow, she didn't want anybody noticing a discrepancy. She reached her cubicle without anyone noticing, but it was only then that it hit her all at once. She was so very tired. After a sleepless night with a fussy baby, 9:11 in the morning felt like midnight.

But the day began, her mom had once told her, whether you want it to or not.

She logged into her workflow and got to work. There were hundreds of styles that needed copy and they were not going to write themselves. Last week the department manager had let all the temps go, and there was no way she was going to let the interns write anything that was going live on the website, so that left her – as copy department editor – to write the styles. Often, writing just meant cutting and pasting something similar and changing a few verbs or nouns kind of like playing mad libs all day. With this much work to do, she would be lucky to get a coffee break much less a lunch.

“Morning Diane,” Jeremy said as he peeked over the low wall of her cubicle.

“Good Morning Jeremy.”

It was actually unusual to get a visitor at her cubicle. Most days everybody said good morning via the company list serve that constantly bombarded everyone with group email chains.

“I didn’t see you say hello this morning. I didn’t know if you were here.”

“I haven’t had the courage to log in yet,” she lied. “I am still poring through the workflow spreadsheet, trying to plan my day.”

Jeremy smiled a little at that. He probably knew that she had come in late, but luckily he wasn’t one of the ones who mattered. He was a photo editor, completely different department, and wouldn’t get the opportunity to peek at her timesheet.

“You want to grab a coffee?” he asked.

“No thank you. Just way too much to do this morning, but if you want to grab one for me I won’t bite you.”

His smile disappeared.

“Dianne...”

“It is too early for this shit Jeremy.”

Now he looked positively crestfallen. His efforts to stoke a little workplace romance had never been welcome, but he had never been pushy and that was somehow tolerable. She hadn’t meant to snap at him like that, but now that it was out in the open she didn’t want to take it back.

“I’m sorry... I...”

“It’s okay. Just let me get back to work. We’ll talk later... when it’s later.”

He left without a word and she swallowed a little. The entire exchange made her mouth taste like she had licked the bottom of the staff refrigerator. It was important to have allies and friends at work, but why did men like Jeremy always confuse kindness with interest?

Work awaited.

It was a little before noon before she got a visit from Thomas, the department manager for Web Copy. Unlike Jeremy, who reminded her of every shirtless guy on Tinder, Tom was a man of impressive girth with a hairline that was in full retreat. He was no-nonsense and always got to the point. It was his best and worst quality.

“I’m sorry, Dianne. I am going to need you to stay late tonight.”

“Why? What happened.”

“Joanne just got let go. A temp that she was managing found out that it was their last day and wrote some profane copy and it slipped by her. Went live on the site.”

This was terrible news that practically froze her blood in her veins.

“I know that I just doubled your workload, and I know that we are supposed to have three editors instead of two, but we moved up Kelly from the copy pool. She will need a few days to get up to speed, though. We also have a new hire that we should get by Monday.”

“This is really... I need to pick up my daughter from daycare tonight. I could come in for the weekend.”

“I know how it is. I was divorced three times, after all. We just have to make a big push tonight so that the styles don’t get held back from this weekend’s sale. I have been on the phone

with angry vendors all day, and probably will be all afternoon. Just say you'll do this for me... just an hour or two to go through Joanne's styles and make sure that there is nothing nasty that she missed."

"You can count on me, boss," she said, doing her best to hold in the deep sigh of disappointment that whirled in her chest.

"Don't call me that. You are as good as gold, Dianne."

*Good as gold... good as dead is more like it* she thought as she rubbed her tired eyes. She could barely force herself to look at the computer screen. She needed to get this work done no later than seven because the daycare closed at 8pm, and when she saw the email containing Joanne's spreadsheet she could feel her heart sink. Not only had Joanne fucked up but is also looked like she was chronically behind on her styles.

*I just have to get through today* She thought, again and again, like a mantra. Like many things, it caught up to her gradually and then suddenly. She drifted off to sleep typing a sentence, and for the rest of the day nobody noticed.

\*\*\*

The letter S was the first thing she noticed when she opened her eyes. The light was dim, maybe the light from the screen was the only light in the room. She realized that her head was on her keyboard, and she sat bolt-upright with a start. Her hand went to her face and she could still feel the indentations of the keys on her cheek. How long had she been out?

Not only was her cubicle dark, but the entire office floor was. She leaned forward and wiped as her brow and something came loose, clattering onto the desk. It was a small piece of

plastic, and when she picked it up and looked at it she realized that it was the ESC key from the keyboard. It had broken loose and stuck to her forehead.

*Fuck* she thought. *I don't know how to fix this.*

It took her a moment to look at her watch. She was still groggy. The world seemed to be flapping a bit, like a flag in the wind. Then, it became suddenly still with the abrupt feeling you get after slamming on the brakes on the freeway.

“Maybe I should have gotten that cup of coffee... or two,” She said to herself, and it echoed in the empty office.

All at once there was panic. Her watch said 10:33pm, and she hadn't picked up her daughter.

She stuck the ESC key in her pocket. She didn't know how to fix it, but she could make sure that she didn't lose it. Her computer had already locked as a result of inactivity, so all she had to do was power off the monitor and lock her drawers and she could get out of here. She went down the front stairs, the same way that she normally left, but when she arrived at the sky bridge to the parking garage she almost hit her head trying to push open the locked door.

*Damn! The doors auto lock at ten* she remembered. She would have to find somebody with metal keys to let her out. The doors were always electronically locked, openable with the plastic key card that all employees carried, but after hours the doors were dead bolted by security. She pulled her mobile phone out of her purse but saw that the battery had run out. It was going to be no help, and she remembered leaving her charger in the car. That usually worked because charging it on the way to work and the way home from work kept it working all day. But the day was over. Hell, prime time TV was over.

*There has to be somebody in this building.*

Her first stop was the front desk, but it was abandoned at this hour. She picked up the phone but there was no dial tone. *What the hell? You turn off the phones at night? How cheap can you be?*

Working for a startup wasn't all it was cracked up to be.

For the next half hour she wandered the empty hallways and abandoned studios of the building. She knew that there was another way down to the parking garage, but she couldn't find it. Looking over at the exit sign that led to the emergency stairwell, she saw that it seemed a little strange.

EX IT

Was there really a space there, or was she just imagining it? The only light that was coming into the building was from the windows, and maybe the light was playing tricks on her. She didn't want to use the emergency staircase if she didn't have to, because its sign insisted that an alarm would sound and the fire department would be summoned.

*"Hola."* She heard from behind her.

Turning around, she saw a janitorial staff member pushing a cart. She was an older woman with dark hair and dark eyes that contrasted with very pale skin. Dianne was startled, but she pasted on a smile. She was relieved that there was somebody in the building other than her.

"Hello? Can you help me? Do you have the key to the doors?" She asked.

*"No habla ingles. Lo siento."*

She didn't speak English and Dianne didn't speak Spanish. She didn't even know enough to realize that the woman was sorry. She wheeled off toward the bathrooms and disappeared inside.

Dianne's frustration doubled and she felt a violent impulse to grab the woman and shake the key out of her. *You won't do your daughter and good in jail* a small, still voice within her told her with a sense of calm she did not feel.

She went to the south side of the building, where the administrative offices and human resources resided. It was an older wing of the building, and instead of open floors with cubicles it seemed to be nothing but rows of locked doors. She saw a shadowy figure walking down the wall rattling doorknobs. It was a security guard in a threadbare uniform, exactly who she was looking for.

As she approached him he shined a flashlight in her eyes, and she startled away from it. When her eyes adjusted to the light, she saw that he was smiling at her with a grin that was missing a tooth. His smile was almost all she could see, because he was a black man with very dark skin. There was a problem with one of his eyes, a milk-white orb that was smaller than the other one. The other was healthy looking, so brown it was nearly black.

"Yes?"

"Can you help me? I'm locked in. Can you let me out?"

"Yes."

"Oh, thank you so much! I really appreciate it."

"Yes."

It was just then that she noticed his accent. West African maybe? Yes might be the only word that he knew.

“You don’t understand me, do you?”

“Yes.”

Her frustration had doubled when she met the custodial staff member, and it easily quadrupled. She left him and he continued rattling the door knobs to make sure they were locked.

She found a spiral staircase near the end of the corridor and took it downward. Maybe this was the access to the underground parking garage. She knew that once she got to it she could get to the parking building across the street. Once again she got to the ground floor and saw an exit sign, but once again it seemed to be... off.

EXI T

Was there a space? Had it moved or was it just the light again?

She went down into the garage but was surprised to see that there was a rolling iron gate that was separating VIP parking spaces from the general parking. It was attached to a glass booth that she had never noticed before, but it it was meant to be manned it was currently empty. Walking up to it, she saw one of those annoying little “will return” clock signs with its spinning red arrow pointed at 6. She assumed that meant six in the morning, and she couldn’t wait that long. There weren’t even any cars in the VIP spaces for this gate to protect. It was probably meant to keep out early birds.

Once again the angry part of her thought that she could break the glass window of the booth, probably with that fire extinguisher next to it. Then she could break the window on the

other side and get into the general parking lot, and eventually her car. She needed her job, though, and a security camera in the corner told her that action would be tantamount to a resignation... not to mention another hypothetical trip to jail.

She waved at the camera for a bit, hoping that someone was watching and someone would come, but that was fruitless and she was getting cold. She hadn't even remembered a warm jacket. She had no choice but to go back into the building.

*I'm trapped* she finally admitted.

Then the panic set in. She should have stopped, sat down and composed herself. But she kept walking while she cried, watching the office become blurry and indistinct through her tears. She thought about her little girl. Had the daycare called her bastard of an ex-husband and informed him that she had neglected to pick her up, or even call? Had he picked her up with a smug smile on his face, talking to his lawyer on his cell the whole time? She came to a window and looked out to the street. It was Friday night in Belltown and all the party folks were out and about on the street. They all looked so happy, except for one guy that seemed to be passed out next to the train tracks. They might as well have been on the moon. They were free, and she was trapped.

She turned and once again saw the emergency exit.

EXIT

As she walked toward it, she heard a clattering noise. Something fell out of her pocket. When she looked down it was her keys but also the ESC key. She picked them both up, but when she looked at the keyboard key she saw that it wasn't the ESC key.

It was the letter S.

She held it up to the sign, holding it in the unnatural space.

EXIST

The door swung open, and she walked through it.

## THE LINE THAT IS DOTTED

David Shrauger

You want a picture of the future? Honk your horn, then imagine 100,000 other people doing the same thing...for all eternity.

“Can you please hurry it up, buddy?” Dan hectored his virtual driver. Cold sweat was dripping down his neck and made him shiver a bit as it ran under his dress shirt and down his back.

The traffic was absolutely gridlocked, which it always was at this time of day, but Dan couldn't afford to miss his appointment. It could be said without hyperbole that his life depended on it.

“What do I owe you?” he asked the UberLyft driver, which was little more than a hologram of the drone pilot that was driving the car (and who knew how many others) from UberLyft headquarters. They had been pretty much the only option for public transportation since the city government went bankrupt and the taxi services went out of business, but he still hated their guts.

“Seventy-five grams,” the driver said.

“Fuck. You want the clothes off my back too?”

“Sorry, buddy. It's the minimum standard donation.”

Dan tapped his SmartPalm with his middle finger, and the subdermal implant projected his hologram screen. Using the sensors implanted in his fingertips, he manipulated the

subscreens in the hologram until he was able to transfer the grams from his MemoPal account to the UberLyft Corporation. The SmartCar chimed a jaunty ringtone, and the locks on the doors released.

“Thank you for your patronage,” the robot voice said. The drone driver had already signed off and put the SmartCar on autopilot.

Dan took a deep breath, but coughed when he took in too much of the city air. His destination was about a block away. He could tolerate the pollution until then.

Canton International’s corporate headquarters shot straight up into the line of smog that had become Seattle’s skyline. While the smog-scrubbing drones buzzed about making the air breathable at street level, no one particularly cared about anything above the tenth or eleventh floor. Nothing up there but a few sickly birds, and the locals had come to regard them as little more than flying rats anyway.

The office buildings of Seattle didn’t have revolving doors anymore. FieldDoors had made them obsolete. Walking through a FieldDoor was an invasive process, as it scanned you down to a molecular level for prohibited items, but they did wonders for the peace of mind of people working inside the building, as well as keeping a complete genetic record of all visitors. Other than a vibration that he could feel in his teeth, the door allowed Dan to walk through without incident.

“Welcome to the Canton Corporation,” the automated greeting system chimed in from all around him “Thank you for being three minutes early for your appointment, Mr. McCanlaus. Ms. Westerling is waiting for you on the nineteenth floor.”

Dan fidgeted with his tie. He hadn't needed to wear one in his line of work, and it was an uncomfortable noose around his neck. However, Canton Corporation had a strict dress code even for its visiting customers. He had heard of people having their appointments canceled because they had disregarded the dress code. He had also heard what happened to them because they missed that appointment.

The waiting room on the nineteenth floor was jam-packed. In fact, it was standing room only. The row of chairs that took up every inch of wall space was completely full of young men and women in nearly identical suits and ties. Everyone was making an effort to avoid eye contact. He accidentally made eye contact with a pretty blond girl who had her hair tied in a severe bun. He almost immediately regretted it and they both looked away. The room was as silent as death.

"Calls, texts, pictures, and sound recording strictly prohibited and may be monitored or recorded," the wall warned him in large red letters that flickered slightly.

He found a place to stand and tried not to fidget. It had been his habit to stream music/movies through his Bluetooth implant when he was waiting, but he didn't see a single person using their SmartPalms for a single thing, so he just joined them in staring into space.

It might have been as much as an hour before his name was called by the automated system and one of the opaque FieldDoors became a translucent image of the picture on his driver's license. He was suddenly gripped with hesitation.

"Daniel McCanlaus, welcome to Canton Corp. Transition Services," the automated system repeated. "Please step through the portal or your appointment may be canceled."

Dan complied.

The office was a spare and Spartan enclosure with a metal desk and a flat screen on each wall. Behind the desk stood a redheaded woman whose beauty shocked him to the point of incredulity. He squinted a little at her, looking for the telltale signs that she was a Mecha, but if she was one, it was the best he had ever seen. She had freckles, moles, and even a little scar between her nose and lip, which she had diminished with some makeup.

“Hello, Mr. McCanlaus,” she said with a British accent, flashing a smile that could melt a man into a puddle. “I am Gemma Westerling, and it is my pleasure to be your Transition Services representative today.”

She offered her hand and Dan swallowed a little as he shook it, as firmly as he could without being too rough. He hadn’t shaken hands with many women in his life and was unused to it.

Their SmartPalms chimed as they exchanged virtual business cards and social media information.

“Thank you for seeing me today,” Dan said as he and Ms. Westerling sat down.

“As I said, the pleasure is all mine. Please tell me what brings you in today.”

He knew that she knew what it was, but he had to observe the formalities.

“I received my draft notice. I ship out in a week.”

“I see,” Ms. Westerling said. “So you are interested in the Cerberus package.”

“Yes.”

“Well, that does make things simple. I couldn’t be more pleased to help you out with this transition. As you know, recruits who opt for the Cerberus package of cybernetic enhancement

are eligible for a 100 percent allotment of pay in their first year of service, which will cover all transition-related expenses. Therefore, with no up-front costs to worry about, all that you need to do is sign on the line that is dotted.”

A screen with a virtual signature line popped up on her desk. All three screens around him, as well as one on the ceiling, began scrolling terms-and-conditions statements.

“Touching the screen with your SmartPalm will give us your virtual electronic signature and constitutes your permission for us to schedule your transition appointment.”

Dan just stared at the screen, nothing more than an X followed by a dotted line.

Ms. Westerling noticed his hesitation. “Are there any questions that I can answer for you, Mr. McCanlaus?”

“Will I...will I ever be able to have children?”

Ms. Westerling smirked a little at that.

“As you may know from the promotional materials, the Cerberus enhancement necessitates the removal of certain redundant body components. All four of your limbs will be replaced, as will your heart and lungs. The digestive system is replaced, and the reproductive system must be removed to make room for the recycling system, which converts bodily waste into usable energy. With that being said, most recruits opt to have their sperm or ovum harvested and frozen at the time of transition for a nominal additional expense...but I don’t think that is what actually concerns you, is it?”

“I...” Dan tried to respond, but he couldn’t stop looking at that X in front of the dotted line.

“You know why I love my job? Because it is easy,” Ms. Westerling said as she tapped her finger to her SmartPalm.

The images on the screen changed to the bodies of blown-apart soldiers, their wounds gaping and smoking, and their faces torn with terror.

“As you know, Cerberus-enhanced soldiers have a 75 percent survival rate, and in the event of injury their pain receptors can be shut off and repairs can be implemented in-theater. However, these unfortunates are among the lucky 10 percent who survive combat in the contested zone and opt for Cerberus enhancement only after they have suffered injuries that qualify for discharge. Since 90 percent of combat troops are Cerberus-upgraded, the government finds little cause to supply the front with anesthetics. Would you like to hear what a transition sounds like without anesthetics?”

One of the screens showed a surgery that looked more like mechanics working on a car, the bleeding woman on the table screamed in unfathomable pain as a nurse carried her leg away. A robot arm pivoted downward and began welding.

“I do realize that it can be a hard decision; it seems like a large sacrifice,” Ms. Westerling said. “But the numbers don’t lie. It is your life. Lose it here or lose it there...and you know what the government does with those they discharge.”

Dan continued to stare at the dotted line.

“Come now, Mr. McCanlaus,” she said. “I really don’t have all day, and I have upcoming appointments that will require much more deliberation. It is the simplest question that can be asked of a man: Do you want to live or do you want to die? Take your chances if you need to. Walk out that door if you want to. We have a contract with the government to repurpose your

organic matter, and they are really quite good at getting what is left to us after battles, so we will make money off you one way or another. It doesn't matter to me. I don't work on commission."

Stay and sign. Walk and take his chances. Dan couldn't move and could hardly breathe. His mouth seemed to be stuffed full of cotton balls, and his head pounded in time with the beat of his heart. He felt himself stand up and tear his eyes away from the screen.

"I'm sorry...I can't...I'm sorry."

He made his way toward the FieldDoor, but when it automatically opened, two Cerberus soldiers were standing in the portal, their bodies covered with armored plate.

"I'm the one who is sorry, Mr. McCanlaus," Ms. Westerling sighed. "I apologize for the theater."

He turned and saw his signature appear on the line that was dotted.

"We didn't really need your signature," she said, showing her SmartPalm buzzing in her right hand. "After all, we shook on the deal."

THE END

## APPLICATION

David Shrauger

*Applications initialized.*

*Handshake authenticated.*

*Consciousness authorized.*

Adam opened his eyes more out of force of habit than an actual desire to wake up, but he knew that if he didn't...

*DayWake has indicated that this is a prime time for wakefulness based upon your biological matrix and habit profile. Waking and activity will optimize your wellbeing.*

Exactly. Adam rolled out of bed and resolved to optimize his day. According to EsteSpan he only had 9600 of them left.

*Good morning Adam. ConciTrac messaged.*

Always, Adam texted back. He was aware that ConciTrac was an application, but their AI was configured to recognize and appreciate the courtesy of a response. Since all that it took to text the response was to think of the response, it didn't require much effort.

*I have taken the liberty of initializing AutoTwitter as you are having outstanding thoughts today. NutriSust has evaluated your basil metabolic rate and prepared an optimal breakfast for you.*

*Thank you,* Adam texted. He was pleased to see that some of his thoughts were being retweeted and favorited by others in his cognitive stream.

He entered his kitchen just as the 3D printer completed weaving his breakfast out of organic flux. It was steaming hot and delicious to look at. Warm cubes of pineapple and scrambled egg whites with slices of red peppers mixed in. It was his favorite, but it was a rare day when NutriSust generated a meal he was displeased with. When this happened, the application took note of his lowered dopamine levels and took that particular dish off the menu.

Adam forked in each bite as ConciTrac initiated FeedSpan to inform him of the news of the day. A power couple was separating. Another pair was marrying. A third was rumored to be seeing other people. There were several new films featuring all three couples available for immediate cerebral download, but he did not have time for blissing today. ConciTrac let him know that today was a work day.

Although ConciTrac had a ShaveDrone at its beck and call it knew that Adam had always taken pleasure in shaving himself, and indulged this throwback behavior. The rasp of the antique razor as it sliced off his whiskers had always been an odd comfort that he never wanted to give up. The ShaveDrone spraying his face with the depilatory chemical and then feeling it scrub the whiskers away just wasn't the same. The rasp of the razor gave him a pleasurable tingle in the back of his neck that EroNet referred to as ASMR and it agreed with ConciTrac that this ritual contributed to the optimization of Adam's life.

As Adam toweled off, TrendSet was creating his outfit in his dressing room. Taking note of Adam's preferences for garments, it cross-referenced those affinities with this current day's fashion trends and printed an outfit out of organic flux that met both conditions. When Adam stepped into them and felt them buckle into place he enjoyed the comfort, but looking into the mirror did not extract much pleasure from trying on new clothes. His applications knew that as an INTP personality type he was not fussy about his clothing. He had a new outfit created every

morning and recycled at the end of the day, but this was more out of habit than anything else. Wearing the same clothes for more than one day was just not done anymore.

*Your Auto has arrived*, ConciTrac texted.

Adam walked through his automated door and climbed into his Auto. Auto was an application just like the rest, but he was a hybrid application that had a physical body in all the self-driving vehicles in the fleet. Auto did not bother to greet him, and that always struck Adam as a bit rude. Auto opened the door, closed the door, and began driving. Since ConciTrac gave Auto all the information required to transport Adam to all points on his itinerary, textual communication was unnecessary. Still, Adam often wondered what conversation with Auto would be like. Maybe one day he would ask Auto a question. Today he could not think of one to ask. The notion, however, started trending and a hashtag developed.

As he rode in the self-driving car, Adam looked at the other motorists in their similarly piloted vehicles. As he saw each one, his line-of-sight facial recognition application, IntroRater, analyzed their social media history in relation to his and made a judgement regarding whether it would be conducive to connect with them. He was an 89% match with a man in the next car, so he began texting with him as they shared a driving path. After they diverged to different roads, they continued their speed-of-thought textual conversation and found that they had a shared interest in the mysteries of Mycenaean culture and both belonged to a speculative historical reconstruction society that met on different days. ConciTrac took the liberty of adjusting Adam's schedule so that he could attend the society meeting that his new friend frequented. None of the others in his current group shared so high a compatibility rating with him.

Shortly before the onramp to TechArts, where Adam worked, there was a disturbance that disrupted traffic. BurnOuts had created a human chain across the road in an effort to impede traffic. They had done this on a few previous occasions, but all that it really accomplished was to make ConciTrac adjust itineraries to compensate for the delay, which only took seconds given the computing power at its disposal. Drone police arrived at the site of the disturbance and released bliss gas to pacify the Burnouts before relocating them off of the roadway. As Adam drove by he looked at each Burnout, huddling in befuddlement by the side of the road. It always was a bit disconcerting looking at them, as he received no input from IntroRater when he did.

Since BurnOuts lacked an implant, IntroRater could recognize the face but only store it for future reference. It could not bring up their social media information, although it could access criminal records. BurnOuts, therefore, were classified as either criminal or not criminal and were always designated as non-compatible. Sometimes they would come up to him on the street, making sounds at him with their mouths and waving at him. Some time ago the Application that translated the sounds into text had gone defunct because not enough people were interested in what the BurnOuts had to say. He vaguely remembered it being called BabelFish.

When he arrived at TechArts, Adam was instantly signed in to his timesheet system. While punctual arrival for the workday was no longer a prerequisite for the work day, it was desirable and made adherence to his ConciTrac schedule much easier. Adam, like most people in Cascadia, loved his job. After all, it was custom-designed for him using his ConciTrac data including his personality profile, interests and aptitudes. He had a first career, of course, that he had loved as well as this one. At least, he thought that he had. Then one day ConciTrac informed him that data indicated that his job satisfaction was on a steep decline and that he would be reassigned to TechArts. He hadn't noticed any boredom or hardship while he was working as an

instructional designer, but if the data said so it must have been the case. At TechArts, he worked in the quality control department and still looked forward to arriving every day.

Adam logged into SlackNet and compared his daily itinerary to that of his colleagues. Since most meaningful labor and production was performed automatically - by applications, machines and drones - fully eighty percent of human worktime was social interaction and mental relaxation. He had a two hour meeting this morning where the topic was generating creative prompts for application artists. DigiDraw and QuickSculpture were two of the most popular TechArts applications, but they tended to produce more viable work when human input was the genesis of the process. In the afternoon there was a school field trip coming through and the last two hours were designated as an award ceremony and celebration, so he would really only have two hours of QA to perform today.

When the children arrived, Adam volunteered to show them around. Most of his coworkers didn't know how to relate to children, but he seemed to have a knack for it. Children had a special developmental implant called Governess that taught them much in the way that schools used to, slowly introducing them to the world in a scaled fashion in keeping with their physical mental development. Governess filtered communication with adults other than their parents to prevent unwelcome situations. Therefore, when confronted with a group of children like this Adam was communicating directly with Governess and the application was communicating with the children. Many adults found this frustrating, but Adam remembered well when he was under Governess' umbrella, and speaking with the application was like talking to an old friend.

*Hello Governess* Adam texted.

*Greetings Adam*

*Let's show the children the DigiDraw studio. I think that they would like that the best and understand it the most.*

*That will be brilliant, Adam. Keep in mind, however, that this is an educational field trip. They will be entertained later in the day.*

Adam enjoyed showing the children where the QA associates sifted through the artworks created by the DigiDraw applications. It was delightful seeing their amazed expressions as they saw the artwork appearing on hundreds of screens and the 3D printers mass-producing sculptures and other tangible representations. Adults tended not to be as facially expressive as children, as they became more used to sharing their emotions electronically, so it was refreshing seeing the children's amazement at something that he had grown so accustomed to.

When the children left, he had his lunch break and talked briefly with Emily from the accounting department. They did not really have much in common, with her love of numbers not really meshing with his love of artistic endeavors, but she was always good company. She always seemed to be bemused by his comments and he thought that she had some very interesting things to say about philosophy. She followed a guru who was trying to create a philosophy of pure mathematics that would be a discrete language shared by applications and humans alike for all communicative purposes, but she was concerned that this would privilege quantifiable topics and leave no room for the imagination in discourse. Adam was no expert, but the prospect was equal parts interesting and unfathomable. After lunch, he was on his way to his first QA session of the day when he was unexpectedly interrupted.

It came as a surprise when ConciTrac interrupted his regular schedule and informed him that, based upon his combination of stress levels and hormone levels it was time for him to have a sexual liaison. This didn't happen often, and never in the middle of a work day. He thought back to his last sexual encounter and EroNet brought forth the memory recording automatically queued in case he wanted to review it. He briefly reviewed the electronic employee handbook for TechArts and came to the conclusion that would not be a good use of company time. ConciTrac, EroNet and CaduCeus the health application were in concord that he needed to take some time for this essential health function, so he acquiesced and interfaced with BackDoor.

Unlike most of the applications, which were open source and publically hosted on the Panopticon Cloud, Backdoor was a local-only encrypted internet. It was a little daunting to enter because it closed ports on other interfaces and made the world unbearably quiet and still for a moment while it analyzed data on all compatible partners who had similarly been designated for an encounter for their health and wellbeing. Although it utilized data provided by ConciTrac, EroNet and CadiCeus the reverse was not true, and many people reported official complaints at this unwarranted level of privacy as a prudish remnant of a dead culture. Despite that, BackDoor was the second only to ConciTrac in volume of use. After an unbearable 20 or so seconds, a match was made and a liaison was scheduled. 95% compatibility was impressive, but not the highest he had ever had. As he had been designated a heterosexual by EroNet since early childhood, his partner was naturally a woman. Backdoor informed him her name was Melody, although some Backdoor users chose to use handles instead of their given name.

Once interfaced with BackDoor, ConciTrac adjusted his itinerary and signed him out of work. There was a time in the distant past when such an action would have needed to be justified with the charging of sick leave or some other similarly exhaustible resource, but in the post-

scarcity economy there was no such thing as an exhaustible resource. The entire purpose of a career in a human life had been redefined and repurposed to maximize the happiness of the individual rather than the productivity of the business. Therefore, signing out for the day to pursue happiness or wellness was not at all unusual.

Auto showed up outside TechArts, as silent and taciturn as ever. A meeting place had been designated by BackDoor and was being prepared for their mutual enjoyment even as he stepped into the vehicle.

*Should I send her a message?* Adam thought, but since he was in Backdoor the thought was not transcribed to AutoTwitter. It was odd to have a thought without feedback or response. In any case, he was always reluctant to use BackDoor's peer to peer message system. It was private and thus unbearably awkward. He never quite knew what to text and BackDoor provided no other conduit into interfacing with an upcoming liaison. Studies had shown that this double-blind meeting was conducive to healthy intercourse, and that establishing a relationship prior to the encounter often would lead to awkwardness or even distress in the time leading up to coupling.

The hotel where Auto dropped him off was an adorable building accented with heart and arrow motifs, a place where people came for erotic fulfillment and was completely designed for that purpose. Walking through the lobby made him chuckle a little. There was a plethora of erotic artwork, some in the pixelated style that indicated that it was the work of well-known application artists. He wondered if DigiDraw had created any of the pieces. It was hard to tell, because the application was capable of creating millions of works per day if given sufficient input. He might have even done some QA on the pieces before they were designated for mass production.

*Stop thinking about work.*

The voice stopped him in his tracks. It was BackDoor speaking, but the application had never communicated anything but directions before.

*Work isn't everything. Take some time and enjoy yourself.*

*But I enjoy my work* Adam texted back

There was no response.

Adam was checked in the moment he walked through the lobby, so he took the elevator to their designated room and it instantly unlocked and opened as he approached it.

With Melody's ETA still standing at about 10 minutes, Adam took a moment to regard the love nest. It was spacious and aesthetically pleasing, customized to what both partners enjoyed in an erotic venue. It had a centrally located bed that had an oval shape, his and her bathrooms on either side of the room, a whirlpool bath that dominated the back wall and a small kitchen where refreshments were currently being printed out of organic flux. All of the walls were mirrored, and that took a moment to get used to. The lighting provided was intentionally dimmed and flickered like candlelight. Such lighting had been shown to dilate the pupils of sexual partners to the point that erotic desire was maximized. He thought for a moment of relaxing in the whirlpool bath, but decided that was not how he wished to meet Melody. Perhaps it was better as a pleasure for them to enjoy together.

Being cut off from the world was perhaps the strangest part of being linked with BackDoor. Normally he would have a world of diversions while he was waiting for her to arrive. Every piece of music ever composed. Every book ever written. Even films, although the pre-

singularity ones were unintelligible and confusing, often needing subtitles to understand what was being said (and footnotes as to why it was being said in some cases). Given no such access to internal stimuli Adam felt that he was paying much more attention to his immediate physical space. The texture of the walls, the sweet smell that lingered in the air, and the low whirring noise of the printers in the kitchen doing their work all seemed to take on an undue significance. Suddenly he had a memory of a word that he used to know. Lonely. That was the word.

BackDoor alerted him that Melody had arrived moments before the door opened, and a lovely young woman with strawberry blonde hair and green eyes walked in. His line-of-sight enabled him to connect with her via IntroRater, and it only took an instant for both of them to know one another's full social media profile and understand why it was that BackDoor had selected them for each other. They fit together like a hand and a glove. The feeling of the sudden strong connection must have been similar to old novels that talked about love at first sight. Such was the joy of the connection that they skipped pleasantries and physically embraced as if they were intimates.

The coupling began and went as well as could be expected.

They lay together on the bed, breathing hard and feeling the sweat cool their bodies. Throughout their intercourse they had not communicated much, but now that they had come to the end of it they found that there was a lot of joy in talking. The topic of the Romantic period of literature fascinated them in the same kind of way that archeologists find fascination in broken pottery. Romance was a symptom of a disease that no longer existed, just another fragment of a world broken and forgotten. They may have been designated as sexual partners, but under different circumstances they could easily have been friends.

So they lay there on the round bed looking up at the mirrored ceiling, texting back and forth while regaining their composure. Then Melody asked him something unusual.

*What was your last happy memory?*

*Happy? I am always happy* he texted back.

*I don't mean that. We are always content, always fulfilled, but have you ever been really happy? So ecstatic and filled with joy that you couldn't contain yourself?*

Thinking back, Adam wasn't sure that he had.

*Have you?*

*I have tried to find it, Melody texted I have scoured my memory recordings looking for it, but I have only found one and it was so long ago.*

His last happy moment occurred to him at that moment.

*Do you think that we could share them? I can see yours and you can see mine?* Adam asked.

*I love that idea* Melody responded.

There was a way to do it. It was an application everyone had called MemoTube. It had fallen out of fashion as more and more people used CogniCloud but they both had it and it was accessible inside the BackDoor bubble.

*Are you ready to do this?* Melody asked as the memories were queued.

*As ready as I'll ever be.*

He was her, within a basin, maybe a sink? The water was warm, not too hot and not yet cold. Soft, careful hands reached down and rubbed oil on baby-soft skin. She was looking down at her, that person that she knew was her mom. He knew because she knew. Her mother cooed and giggled, washing behind her ears. He could hear her own laughter. Their laughter, and the laughter made them laugh more. Mom put some more baby oil on her head and rubbed it in. It tickled and they laughed some more, and the laughter made more laughter. The entire world was laughter.

She was him, and he was running. It took her a moment to center herself to what was happening. Something hard hit his hands and he gripped it as if his life depended on it. He pulled it to his chest. She was him, and he was dirty. The filth that covered him didn't bother him, because he turned and he was there. He knew that it was his father and therefore she knew it too. She could feel all the bumps and all the bruises. All of them earned from falling down in the mud or diving to catch the ball in the grass. His dad held up his hands and they threw him the ball. He caught it and texted him to go long, fly pattern. Their legs hurt from all the running, but it was a good pain. They ran the pattern and caught the ball again, a high jump ball that caused them to fall on their tailbone. The pain was sharp, and when they tried to get up, they could only make it to one knee. Dad came up and helped them to their feet.

*I am proud of you* his dad texted to him, and those few words became his whole world.

When the memories faded back into the room with the mirrored ceiling, they had to look at themselves for a moment to reorient themselves, and remember who was who. He reached over and pulled her closer, and he felt a little moisture on his shoulder. Adam realized that she was crying a moment before he recognized that he was crying too. They were there, like that, for

some time. Then BackDoor informed them that their reservation would expire in an hour. This room was reserved by another couple.

After they dressed in fresh clothes created for them by TrendSet, they vowed to meet up again before they shared a kiss and went their separate ways, but once the world opened to them and the input came flooding in it was easy to forget. Easy to swim the information and the events of the day. They would always be connected to each other, that was certain, but then again they were connected to everybody.

That evening, when Adam's head hit his pillow he no more remembered Melody than he remembered what he had for breakfast. He hadn't needed to remember anything in years, after all. He had MemoTube to remember for him if he needed to recall something. He settled into to sleep, and the applications stored in the implant at the base of his skull detected it and instantly began their nightly ritual to allow him a peaceful sleep. It was to be a deep sleep, free of dreams.

*Consciousness concluded.*

*Handshake disengaged.*

*Applications updating.*

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