

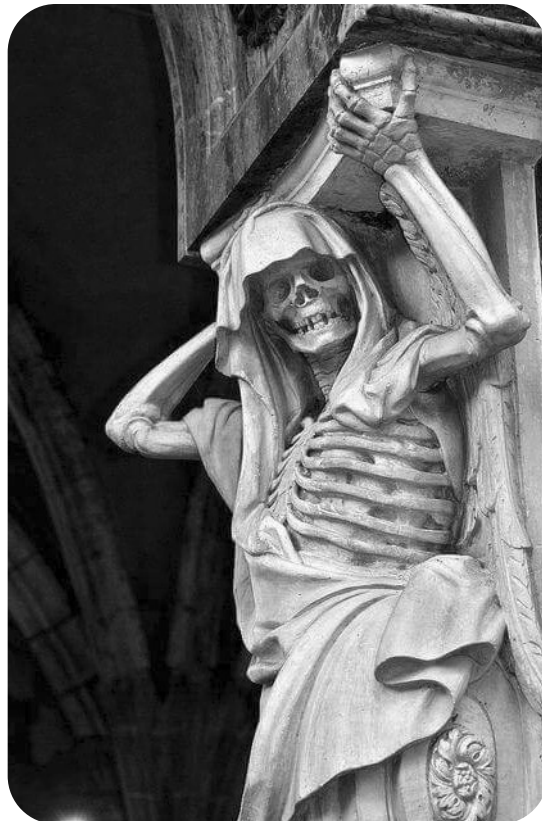
# Corner Bar Magazine

Volume 1 Number 7

Page 1 – WRITING FOR THE BUBBLE-BATH BOOK MARKET by John Domenichini. John Domenichini is a technical writer living in San Jose, California. He has a background in both education and journalism. His writing has appeared or is forthcoming in The Quotable, Bartleby Snopes, Yellow Mama, and Foliate Oak Literary Magazine.

Page 4 – WAITING ROOM by Stanley Kov. He writes, “I currently reside in Russia, Yekaterinburg. I work as a web developer at a rather small company, am looking to emigrate, and speaking about myself in third person makes me want to puke into my mouth a little bit.”

Page 19 – THE HONKED by Lee Blevins. Lee Blevins lives in Lexington, Kentucky. He is a balding twenty six year old who sometimes wears an ill-advised mustache.



# WRITING FOR THE BUBBLE-BATH BOOK MARKET

by JOHN DOMENICHINI

Most of the questions I get as an author nowadays are about the bubble-bath book format. I wrote my two most recent novels specifically for the format because I believe in the future of the bubble-bath book market.

## **The Morality of Bubble-Bath Books**

First of all, I respect people who have moral objections to the format. If you object to the use of the amniotic-like fluid for the bubble bath solution or you object to the fact that the transference balls contain brain cells created in a lab, I appreciate your point of view. If you have any doubts about the morality of the format, do not write for the market. Focus on the traditional formats instead.

On the other hand, if you've thoroughly considered the ethical issues involved and still want to write for the market, my experiences and opinions might be helpful to you.

## **A Bubble-Bath Book by Any Other Name**

Let me say that I use the term "bubble-bath book" instead of other terms you might hear, such as "absorption books," "mood books," "transference books," "osmosis books," "experiential books," and even "mind control books." I like the fun quality of the term "bubble-bath-book." The

term has the right playfulness for the type of stories that are best suited for the format.

## **Experience Bubble-Bath Books**

If you're considering writing for the market, but haven't bathed a bubble-bath book yet, that's the first thing you need to do. No explanation will suffice. More than half of the people who try it don't like it. If you don't like the experience, don't write for the market.

Bathing a book is a very ambiguous, delayed, gestalt-like experience. It is not linear at all. Keep in mind that the experience varies wildly from person to person. However, there is some commonality. Very rarely does anyone get a sense of the story during the bath. The story creates a mood while you're bathing, but that's it. Some people love bubble-bath books just for the mood. They might not care about the actual story.

What I find very interesting is that, regardless of how long the bubble-bath book is, it takes about 45 minutes to completely absorb the story as it seeps into your pores, but you won't know that until much later. If you only bathe the book for about 30 minutes, you'll still get a vague sense of the overall story. Some people do that on purpose because it gives the story a dream-like quali-

ty.

How long it takes for the story to reveal itself to you after the bath varies from a few hours to about a week. Some people hate that, some people love it. Personally, I love it. Sometimes, a day or two after my bath I'll have some downtime and my mind will wander, when suddenly I realize that I have the whole story in my head.

Another interesting fact is that interpretations of the same bubble-back book vary tremendously. I love this aspect of the format. I've talked to some bathers of my pure bubble-bath book, "Whispers on a Sun-Drenched Day," who interpreted the story exactly the way I had in my mind, while others interpreted it completely differently.

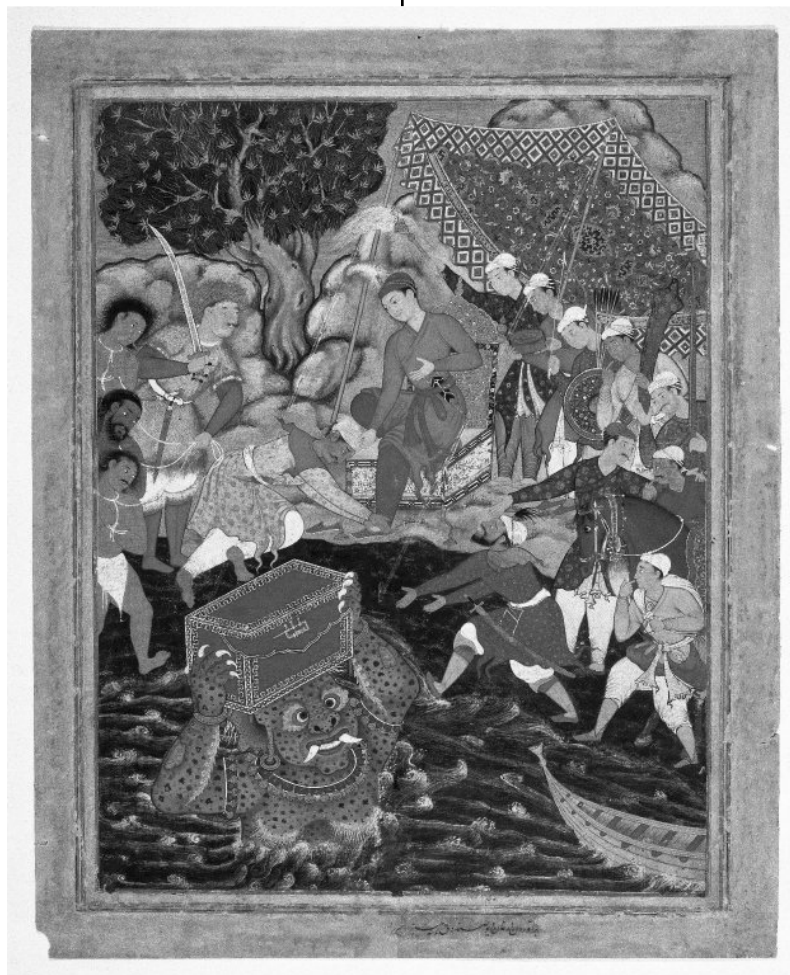
Sometimes, they don't even have the characters' names right, but they're fine with that and so am I. In fact, I love it.

### **What Makes a Good Bubble-Bath Book**

The market is only four years old, so it's early, but not so early that we can't make some generalizations.

If you've heard anything about the bubble-bath book experience, it's probably that the books only leave you with an impression of the story. While not perfect, there's something to be said about the "impression" explanation. My advice to aspiring bubble-bath book writers is to focus on creating a visual impression.

What works well: physical descriptions; action; simplicity; and emotions, both



happy and sad (but not too sad). In my opinion, fantasy is an ideal genre for bubble-bath books, but other genres work well, too. For example, romance and adventure stories work very nicely, as well as some of the softer sub-genres of science fiction.

What doesn't work well: abstract descriptions, analysis, and complexity (complex structure, complex wording, and complex plot lines). The bubble-bath book format doesn't work for non-fiction. If facts matter a great deal, the format doesn't work. In terms of genre fiction, it doesn't work for suspense or mysteries. I'm not sure about horror, but I would stay away from it. Since bubble-bath books affect mood quite strongly, I would avoid anything dark or violent. I don't trust rumors that try to link bubble-bath books with violence, but no reason to tempt the devil.

Since the story of a bubble-bath book overtakes you all at once, the sequence of events can lose its impact, especially if the story has flashbacks or if events are otherwise out of order.

I did not write my book "Wayward Monks" specifically for the bubble-bath book market. It was transferred to the format later. A lot of bathers of the book felt confused. That didn't happen with my two pure bubble-bath books: "Whispers on a Sun-Drenched Day" and "Women of the Cloth." In my opinion, it's because "Wayward Monks" had plot twists, flashbacks, and surprise reveals, while the other two didn't.

I write fantasy with a lot of world building. For my two pure bubble-bath books, I

made sure that the worlds did not include complex magic systems. It might be possible, though. Jordana Washington has a moderately complex magic system in her pure bubble-bath book "The Farastan Trading Post." It's one of the most popular bubble-bath books on the market. That's because Washington uses action to draw her magic system's lines of demarcation. I bathed the book and I have very strong impressions about the limitations of her magic system. Washington makes it work by showing not telling, by demonstrating where the magic fails and where it succeeds

### Conclusion

It's early yet, and there's so much still to learn, but the bubble-bath book market shows promise. For some writers, it sounds like a boring way to write. But, if you like to create new worlds, provide vivid descriptions, or evoke emotions through your writing, it might be the right format for you. People who enjoy book bathing, usually love beautiful scenes; if you can deliver them, you can build a devoted fan base in no time. The bubble-bath book market is a whole new world just waiting to be written. Only you can decide if you have what it takes to help write it. ❖

# WAITING ROOM

by STANLEY KOV

“Should I just go back into space, then?” Andy asked. “What am I, some kind of Flath?”

Flath was a creature that lived in space and fed on pure vacuum. The laser-like structures in its mucosal lining as well as a particle accelerator, weaved into the quadruple epiglottis to generate matter from virtually zero of it, were, of course, nothing like what had now been rumbling and gurgling inside Andy’s stomach. He still loved his *nihilo* in the very least wrapped into a whole-wheat bun with some mayonnaise spread on top, so the idea of going back into the interplanetary naught didn’t sound particularly appealing to his ears. The thought of deep space gave him something considerably viler than butterflies. In fact, the vacuum that formed inside his bowels after a three year long flight in a cryo-seat had a decent chance to sustain a couple of Flaths alive for a few dozen light years.

The absence of anything to breathe amidst the stars bothered him little for reasons beyond his starveling comprehension.

The smiling ten-eyed Nabian passport controller did not seem worrisome about it, either. With her official smile denuding layers of teeth into four directions, she glared into Andy’s eyes. Glaring as a process was a bit different for Nabians: pressing their

hanging eyeballs against their interlocutor’s were a sign of good form. Andy recoiled. As a human being, he preferred the physicality of his eye contacts to remain at the lowest possible level.

“Most confound apologies, Mister Poodlevector,” she said. “I’m not quite used to handling human visitors.”

“It’s Podacter. Pod – Acter!” Andy grabbed his red spiked hair that, judging by the posters around him, in the course of his trip had seemed to have given way to purple locks along the unending and unstoppable course of the intergalactic fashion. “Can you not get used to handling simple human surnames?” He looked about: aside from a covey of Fingerlingers, tap dancing to some obnoxious, squealing melody with their nail-heads near the Dia-rriva Plus-sweets kiosk, and a glob of white energy that wore over its pulsating corpus, apparently, something painfully reminiscent of a kippah, he came the closest of all to resemble a human being. “Just mine will do, I suppose.”

The emotion that the passport controller was trying to elicit through twisting her dangling eyeballs over her head was unknown to Andy. She could be blushing for all he cared. What mattered most was to finally slip past the monument of alien bureaucracy that didn’t seem too keen on

letting him through.

“I get that you have troubles with pronunciation,” Andy said. “What I don’t get is, why the hell am I not being allowed into Nabia? Here’s my visa, see?”

He poked at the microchip in his forearm. It lit under the skin and gurgled ‘Have a good trip!’ like a toy with a dying battery.

“I told you already, Mister Pterodacter, you do not have an acceptance test with your visa.”

“Nobody told me anything about acceptance tests before, for Hawking’s sake!”

“That’s probably because they were only introduced a year ago.”

“Well, how in the name of Armstrong should I have known that? I’ve been frozen for three years on the way to your damn planet. Don’t you appreciate interstellar tourists?”

“I’m sorry, Mister Piedabblers, but I cannot let you in without the test. Maybe you should’ve set out a year or two later. I heard that Earth Faster-Than-Light technologies improved in the recent year.”

“How should I have known that—”

Before he could finish his question, it became rhetorical. Andy took a couple of deep breaths in to calm his inner Socrates that desired to jump out and jam something sharp into those floating eyeballs.

“Look, Missy, or whatever the name of yours was again...”

He squinted, preparing to decipher the language her badge was supposedly written in. Andy wasn’t short-sighted; the squinting commanded his lenses to augment reality, to warp it a little bit if it became *too* real.

Those weren’t quite the newest, nor a well-maintained model. Instead of translating the damn thing, they tiled his view with thousands of pictures of naked Nabian females. Although his psychology had shown itself to be quite stable before the flight, the equipment they used on him didn’t quite have the whole explicit part of the Nabian virtuality at its disposal.

“Sagan’s hair!” He went into a moderate feat of hysteria. “Lenses, no. Lenses, stop. Lenses, translate. I don’t need Nabian escorts. Even for this cheap.”

“Let me help you, Mister Pornacter.”

She touched the badge. Its inscription morphed into letters of the familiar alphabet. Fighting off the last free but rather non-erotic download advertisement, Andy finally had a chance to take a better look at the badge. Immediately, he wondered why in the Universe’s name it said ‘Vlada’. Then he realized: only a Vlada could do something like that to him. Those Communists! They’re everywhere, he thought, just as his grand-grand-grand-grand-father thought a couple hundred years ago before they took him into the looney bin.

“Okay, *Vlada*. How come you have a human name, *Vlada*?”

“I googled it,” she replied. “Choosing a name is the most important, and also the first decision any Nabian makes in his life.”

There was a pause. Andy couldn’t decide what he wanted to know the least about right now: the Nabian childbirth process, in which they somehow managed to give names to themselves, or the aforementioned company’s financial figures for the

last couple of centuries. Both were equally as disturbing to him.

“Anyway, Mister Poordirector,” Vlada said, “I have news for you - the bad one and the good one.”

“That damn cliché. Give me the bad one first. Guess I’m most prepared for this kind of news now.”

“My working hours are over. See you tomorrow, Mister Podacter.”

“But what about the good—”

Before he could grab one of her eyeballs in a bout of uncontrolled anger, the shutters between them closed. Vlada apparently didn’t forget her good manners. She jammed all of her eyeballs into the transparent shutter-screen and waved her triplet limb at him.

Through the speakerphone, she said, “You can wait till my next shift in our comfortable waiting room located behind you. Next working day is only just twelve human hours away.” The volume of it was set for someone other than human. Andy never been shell shocked before, but the stunning noise in his ears and the bloody flash in his eyes came close to what he imagined as being contused.

“Just as if I never left Earth in the first place,” he uttered, rocking back and forth under the residual effect of the sound waves, better described as tsunamis. “At least she finally got my name right.”

The entrant’s hall around him was now empty. He alone remained un-invited into the land of multi-eyed, self-named, explicit content-friendly creatures. It was either a couple of steps back, or out into the vast-

ness of space, ass-frozen for another couple of years to a rather unpleasant synthetic leather of the cryo-seat. The choice was obvious. Andy grabbed his baggage and trailed into the waiting room.

A single bench was all that filled the premise he walked in. As if to compensate for the scarceness of the room, it looked like the longest bench he ever encountered. The walls of the room stretched somewhere deep into the cosmoport, and as far as the walls went, so did the bench.

To Andy’s pity, it was almost completely occupied by a giant blob of purple and slime. The prospect of sitting next to a potentially omnivorous entity of unknown origin didn’t appeal to him, but spending the night standing sounded really uncomfortable. Andy’s consumerist guts shivered before the thought. Although he usually didn’t find any pleasure in being eaten and digested, the benefits were outweighing the costs right now. Trying to not slip on its drippings and avoid getting into the spiked tentacles, he made his way to the edge of the bench, where a tiny space remained unoccupied.

The bench felt surprisingly soft, and even seemed to have some sort of massage features for those tight spots in the derriere. After he flicked a couple drips of slime off his tungsto-kevlar jacket and settled against the massaging brush, he even managed to relax. If not for the muttering sound that came from under his bottom, he would’ve already been watching pink ponies jumping over the Milky Way. Maybe the mechanism hadn’t been on maintenance for a while.

Andy lifted his butt off and eyed whatever that could have made the noises.

“Darn humans,” said whatever was making the noises. “Watch where you are putting your gluteal musculature.”

“Oh”— Andy made room for the creature — “sorry. I never noticed you until now.”

The being got out from the captivity of his buttocks. A tiny hamster-like creature dressed as a space ranger discontentedly shook itself. It looked kind of cute, if not for the eyes that looked as if they wanted to jump out of the sockets and kick Andy’s butt, and he had seen enough in his travels through space to not rule out the possibility of that happening.

“Hygiene, human,” it said. “Do you know what hygiene is?”

“I’ve spent three years in a cryo-seat,” Andy replied, keeping distance, but with the ginormous, purple danger to his other side. “What do you expect? You don’t exactly smell of roses, either. No need to touch me, by the way. I’m kind of not into interspecies relationships. ”

“Neither am I.” The creature pointed at the blob next to him. The tentacles it jerked back from Andy’s neck suggested the sudden reprise had just barely missed him.

“The thing just eats and... you know,” the creature said.

“What does it eat?” Andy asked, looking around the room. “There’s no one around.”

“Well, that is true. I hope you are able to connect the dots with all of that information at your disposal?”

Andy was indeed able, and he moved

an inch away from the purple creature as soon as he did. A gulp ran down his throat without him ever intending to swallow.

“And the slime is—?”

“Yep.”

If there was a potential ‘sweet’ to his potential dreams in the waiting room, it had just vanished. Who knew it was both a WR and a WC? That ten-eyed Nabian wretch probably did.

Andy pulled a cigarette out of his pocket. A nice relaxation of cancerous nature was supposed to do him good. At least the long term danger wasn’t even remotely as frightening as its short term equivalent that waved right next to him like a lump of jelly.

“You have a light?” he asked the tiny creature.

A wave of sound pierced his ears again. “No smoking in the waiting room!” The voice was familiar. The Nabian controller still smiled at him a couple meters away behind a thick veil of glass.

“Didn’t you say your day was done?” Andy yelled.

She spared herself of replying. Pushed the button on her control panel; the outer shutter fell down. It was, by the looks of it, made of reinforced tungsten, so the chances of getting to her suddenly became even slimmer. That also did Andy good, however, because her lipless smile definitely wasn’t something he’d have liked to stare at any longer.

“Seriously, though — don’t,” the tiny creature said. “See the concoction that’s dripping off the beast? Flammable. You smoke, and we’re all going to see our grand-



relatives very soon.”

That’s when Andy started really regretting the trip. He was never a compulsive smoker, nor an obsessive one, but rarely was he ever stopped from fetching a cig, especially by an explosive lump of snot. Vexed, he threw the cig into the cigarette bin. The image on it clearly suggested he’d stop smoking instead of wasting the precious space inside of the container. The cig didn’t make it to the bin; the blob grabbed and swallowed it with a smack and a gurgle.

“See?” The tiny creature sneered. “Eats everything.”

“How come you’re not lunch, then?”

“Guess I’m too bitter, even for a dessert.” The tiny creature shrugged a tiny shrug. “Actually, I bet you wouldn’t have lasted longer if not for your disgusting stench. Considering the smell of its own, I’d advise you take a good bath.”

“I’d rather not, for safety’s sake,” Andy said, squinting at the blob. “Besides, there are no baths around here, as far as I am concerned.”

The creature sniffed. It settled on the bench and crossed its legs, looking like a *Le Penseur* were Rodin to have had a penchant for guinea pigs and LSD.

“What’s your name?” Andy asked.

“Hix,” it replied, “but I’m not quite in the mood for meeting people that’d soon be a lunch.”

“I’m Andy.”

“Whatever.”

They sat silent for a while, only accompanied by the occasional burps coming from the blob. Andy caught himself imagining

how the food traveled through its bowel nodes and whirling in spirals of stomach acid. Then he remembered what the food was supposed to be, and his imagination ceased to function.

“So, tell me,” he said, “why are you here, Hix?”

“Doesn’t matter,” Hix replied.

“Come on, don’t be shy. We have a whole night ahead of us.”

“I was actually hoping the appetite of this being would outweigh its olfactory bias long before the night.”

“Well, that’s an awful thing to say.”

“That’s an awful smell to stink.”

“Can you stop mentioning it already?”

Andy roused, but the tentacles politely insisted on him to remain in place.

“Alright, alright, fine!” Hix said. “You darn humans and your darn curiosity.”

“Tell me, then. What brought you here, and why were you not allowed in?”

Hix furrowed his brows. He looked quite cute, almost like a baby hamster. Driven by sudden tenderness, some sort of reflex even made Andy stretch his finger towards the tiny thing to caress its head. The blaster that Hix immediately pulled on him looked like it’d barely scratch a fly. That is, a fly from Earth. Those still had no influence on the intergalactic stock market, unlike their evolved relatives from the Manoora system.

“The hell do you think you’re doing?”

Hix yelled. Andy jerked his hand back.

“That’s a nice gun you have there.”

“You think this is some kind of joke?” he asked. “Didn’t that old movie about

weird men in funeral wear teach you anything about small guns?"

"It's not the size, it's how you use it?"

Andy wasn't sure if that was the right lesson he drew from there.

"It's not the size, period. The thing blows a fully-armed Hymerical Olpatophan to pieces with a single hit."

Whatever that creature was, Andy probably missed it during his biology classes. But its name sounded earnest enough.

"Look, human" – Hix holstered his Olpatophan slayer – "if you want to have a conversation like all of us intelligent cosmic beings, you should stop treating me like some pet suslik, *capiche?*"

"Got you."

"Anyway," Hix said, "I'm not a fan of sniveling, but my mom died."

He sniveled anyway. "Oh no, my poor mom. I loved her so much!"

"What happened to her?" Andy asked.

"What could happen to a damn Hamsterios Sapio? Whatever those ten percent of brain activity allow you to do, it seems to me like you're still at one max. "

With all the power granted to him by that one percent of brain activity, Andy guessed that the list of those things that could happen to a Hamsterios Sapio shouldn't be too long.

"I'm sorry about your mother, Hix," he said. "Not everyone's mom gets flattened out."

"Flattened out?" Hix bursted into his micro-hamsterio-tears. "What are you, some kind of Red-Tardio syndrome survivalist? She fought in the galactic war against the

deadly Lydorian troops. She fell in battle for our freedom."

"Oh."

He stretched his hand towards Hix – some good patting on the back should've done him good. As the creature fell off the bench after his hearty pat, he quickly realized the choice of gesture wasn't quite right for the occasion.

"I'm sorry, I—"

"It's fine." Hix climbed up the bench. "I needed this, actually." Settling back in his place, he wiped the tears off his whiskers. "Okay, I'm good now. Anyway, that's beside the point of why I'm here."

"But what about your mom?" Andy asked. "I thought she was the reason—"

"That was like, what? Two human years ago, I think. She never loved me, anyway. She was much more fond of Nix, Wix, Dlix, C-mix, Flix, Delix, Critix—"

"I get it," Andy said.

"Don't interrupt me, human. It's annoying."

"Just get to the point."

"No amount of space vacuum could compare to the amount of patience you have, human. I tried smuggling a type-D atomic-core mini processing facility into Nabia. In my stomach."

"What? Type-D? It is half the size of that blob."

"That was a minified version. It was just about your size, actually."

"But you're so—"

"Don't ask, okay? It involved minifying rays, lots of water and ungodly amounts of willpower. I'm not in the mood for a reason,

and now you know that reason.”

Silence ensued again. The more Andy tried imagining the most certainly unpleasant procedure of stomaching a whole atomic-core processor, the surer he became that he'd lose it right now if he did have something to eat. He was actually lucky to have had his last lunch about two hours and three years ago. But, considering there were no food supplies at hand, nor any space cafeterias to satisfy his hunger, Andy decided he'd occupy his otherwise languishing stomach with some more of those *conversations*.

“Were you here for long?” he asked.

“No,” Hix replied, “just a couple of hours. The security service of the airport told me they'd pick me up as soon as the blob would have something to be occupied with. You, in other words.”

“Me? Like—”

“Yeah. The guards and the blob don't really get along well. Besides... Ah, here they are.”

One of the shutter segments slid up and let a couple of heavily armed Nabians in. They wore an armored plate on each of their floating eye-sockets. With a strict march, yet still wary about the tentacles flowing around the room, they approached the bench.

“Hix Herveticus?”

“That's me.”

“You're coming with us.”

The guards took him up in his arms, and then they all headed back into the crevice. Dangling on his tiny

limbs, stretched in a crucifix-like position, Hix turned his head to Andy.

“When you're in, aim for the upper intestine,” he said. “It chops the food into pieces there. Won't be painless, but at least it's not like in the lower intestine where you slowly dissolve in the stomach juices.”

Hix made chopping movements with his hanging paws. Andy winced. He didn't find being chopped into pieces pleasant, not even with the provided comparison.

“Thanks for the advice, I guess,” Andy said. “You have a nice prison trip, too.”

“Good luck, human. How'd that saying go? Always aim for the stars, and you'll reach the sky. Just don't take it too literally.”

Before Andy managed to say something witty in turn, the convoy hid behind the shutter. He was all alone again, if not for the all-consuming purple blob that already looked as if the lunchtime was about to begin. Andy could use a lunchtime, but not as a lunch himself.

It was the time to run. He wasn't ready



to die, especially in a painful, slow and gastrointestinal way. The problem was, there seemed to be no places to run to and hide in from the all-devouring entity. The room had nothing except for the bench, the walls and the seemingly infinite space, stretched into the depths of the cosmosport.

He desperately searched for an idea to pop inside his head, yet just got senseless garbage instead. Words flew before his eyes: 'run', 'sleep', 'eat'. None of those helped, and soon he thought he'd rather not see those words before his eyes anymore. They wouldn't go.

"Damn lenses," he muttered. "When you don't need them to read your mind, they do just that."

Reading minds! Yes, that's exactly what he needed. Andy delved into his inner pocket and fished out a circular translation device. Praying it'd have its battery charge after years of being unused, he slapped it on to the blob. With the slime dripping down its body, the device slipped lifeless for a bit, sending shivers down Andy's spine, but after a couple of seconds it lit and then, digging way through the folds of slime, merged with the blobby being. It wasn't supposed to be swallowed - whatever to name that mass of clay did to the device - but Andy took his chances. Or, rather, his only chance.

"Can you hear me?" Andy asked.

The speaker coughed somewhere deep inside the blob's tissues.

"I can't hear you," Andy said. "The speaker must not be working."

"I - wasn't - speaking - idiot," the

speaker growled. "I - sneezed."

"Bless you."

Apparently, it wasn't the best, nor the most appropriate, but the only thing he could say in response to such a statement.

"No - bless - you. Eating - time."

"Don't eat me just yet."

"Why? I'm - hungry."

"I'm hungry, too. But you don't see me eating you, for example."

"That's - poor - argumentation."

"Come to think of it..."

"Eating - time."

"Wait." Andy pushed the tentacles away as they rushed towards him. "Do you have a name, or something?"

"What - do - you - need - my name - for? Does - human - food - ask - names - too?"

"Most of what we eat isn't intelligent nor alive - mostly one or the other - so I guess not. But since I have that opportunity, why wouldn't I use it, right?"

The blob gurgled for a while, probably crunching some of those morality cogs inside of his blobian mind. It seemed like they were rarely ever used, especially when deciding the fate of its dinner.

"Moettette'Gro'Frahailo'Exterominatos' Ad'Regol'Ignerin'Hat," the speaker said.

"Can I call you, say, Moettette?" Andy asked.

"Sounds - good."

"So, Moettette-"

"Eating - time!"

"Just tell me this one thing before you eat me." Andy hid behind his hands, crossed overhead, peeking at the entity that

weaved its tentacles around him. “Are you allergic to wool?”

“No,” the speaker replied, “I — guess — not. Why — do — you — ask?”

“It’s just that I’m good with knitting, and I thought you could really use a sweater. It’s quite cold here, and you’re not dressed well. I’ll make you one if you want to. We can have reindeers on it.”

“Just shut up and let me eat you already.” Its tone went from being like that of a carnivorous monster to that of an unsatisfied snob at an expensive restaurant.

“Where did your stuttering go?” Andy asked.

“Well, I figured it’d make you feel more eatable,” Moette replied. “Humans are used to all those cerebral monstrosities and their gurgling sounds. Hard to break through a shell of stereotype, you know?”

“That makes sense.”

“Just, please sit still. I hate when food fidgets about.”

“Come on, dude. We just met, for Neil deGrasse’s sake. You don’t eat people that you’ve just met. It’s simply good form. By the way, you *are* a dude, right?”

Andy eyed Moette, unsure of what exactly to look for.

“Of course not,” Moette said. “This isn’t some clichéd story. Gender, let me tell you, is nothing but a cosmic construct. I ate gender for breakfast, because it does not define me as a person. Got it?”

The blob gargled its last question like an alcoholic with a Louis Armstrong-kind of bass.

“Can you *not* eat me, then?” Andy

asked. “Going by that same logic, I’d say this trope is rather overused.”

“Male or a female or none at all, hunger is no artistic device, nor an artificial construct. Believe me.”

Believing that was easy. Giving up life wasn’t quite the same.

“You know,” Moette said after a while of wobbling, “I’ll eat you a bit later. It’s just that I rarely speak to anyone, so I figured — why not converse for a change?”

“Yeah, let’s converse. Sure, why not?” The abundance of reasons why couldn’t possibly outweigh a tiny chance of staying alive, at least for a bit longer.

“But if you thought you caught me with your smart tricks — ‘smart’ in quotes, of course — then don’t think that anymore. Food is food, even if it knows my name.”

“True.” Andy wiped the sweat off his forehead.

“You know what?” Moette said. “You need to meet Will. He’s an awesome guy.”

“Who?” Andy asked. “There’s someone else in here? Someone you didn’t eat?”

“Yeah. He lives further down the room, about a mile away. Wait a minute, I’ll bring him.”

Moette sucked the sprouts growing on its body inside. They all threaded into a giant ball which rolled further through its body and off into the distance.

“Can I ask you something personal?” Andy said.

“Go ahead,” Moette replied. “I’m not a shy person.”

“Do you have any relatives?”

“Probably not. To be completely honest

with you, I'm just mutated organic waste from space that someone brought with his sandwich leftovers."

"That must be harsh."

"I'm used to it. Eating various pets was quite unpleasant at first, at least not until they stopped fighting back inside my stomach. Much better with children, because they usually don't have fur on them. I hate fur. It gives me bad heartburn."

"I feel for you."

That was an obvious lie, but in order to justify himself before his own conscience, Andy attempted to. He did eat a cat once at a Korean restaurant, but it was claimed to be synthetically created and vegan-friendly. And children - no, he couldn't recall eating children. However, his stomach quickly

reminded him that even a child would do now, especially with some nachos and guacamole on top.

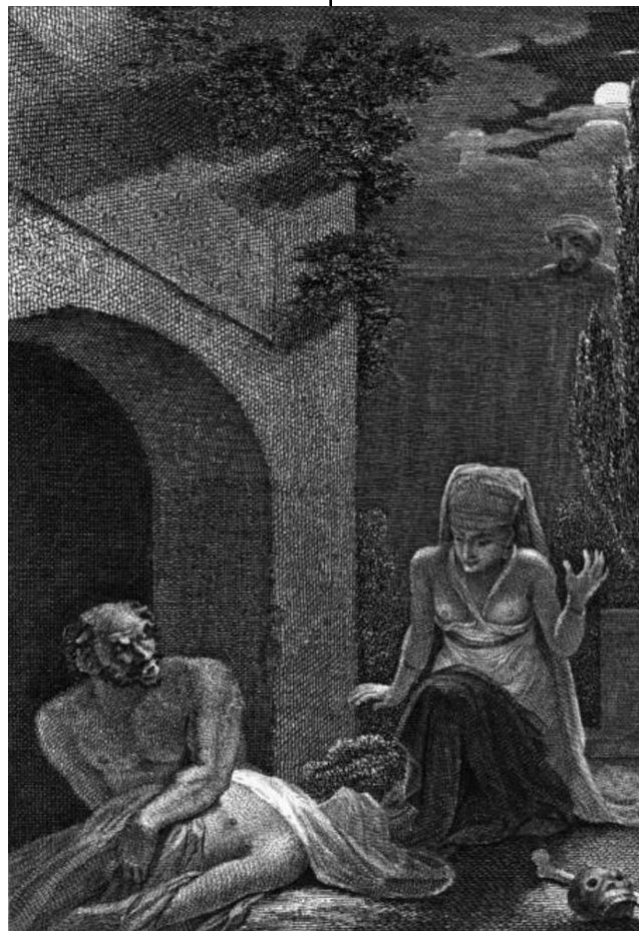
"How come you get away with eating all those people?" Andy asked.

"Technically, the waiting room is under no one's jurisdiction," Moette replied.

"They don't really care for anyone out here. Actually, I'm giving them a favor by cutting down their immigration problems drastically. If you're here after hours, you're basically toast. A giant, raw toast. Without bread. Not really toast, though, no. I'll just swallow you, in other words."

"Right. I like your choice of metaphor."

The blob wavered; its tentacle ball was coming back. Reaching the end point, which Andy was unsure whether to name a



front or a back, it stopped. After moments of wavering, Moette spit all of the tentacles back out.

Hanging from one of the sprouts, a man slumbered peacefully, as if lying in a bed. His clothes looked like that of a janitor - blue and baggy - but he had no badge on him, and Andy knew well that space janitors always carry badges. You're not a janitor if you don't have a badge with your name on it, one of the few laws in space that actually worked. Other than that, his long blonde hair and tall height suggested otherwise.

"Wake up, Will," Moette said. "I brought you a friend. No, wait, I brought you to a friend"

"Do you have a sore throat, mom?" Will uttered. "Just five more minutes, okay?"

"It's never easy waking the guy up," Moette said. "The dude can sleep for days. Come on, Will, wake the hell up already!"

"Where... Where am I?" Will was slowly waking to a disappointing answer. Moette put him down on the ground like a newborn baby, with tenderness.

"I'm Andy," he said. "Moette already introduced you. In absentia, kind of."

Will looked at both of them and burped loudly, keeping his eyes on Moette.

"It's okay, Will," Moette said. "Thanks to this gentleman, I can speak human. No need for our language anymore."

"I wasn't talking to you." Will scratched his head. "Maybe that lasagna I ate did, but not me. And nice to meet you, Andy."

He stretched his hand towards Andy, and Andy stretched his. The problem was, they were two meters away. Moette looked

like it already identified the issue. The blob pushed Will closer with its tentacle. The man glided on the floor, still only half-seated and half-awake.

Andy shook Will's hands. "Were you two talking in burps?"

"He's quite good at my language," Moette said. "Always so clear in his speech. Hell, I myself am worse at my own language. We can speak for days, discussing the issues of personal identification in a society based on nothing but stigmas."

"Honestly, I never even realized we were talking," Will said. "But it was fun nonetheless."

"You're just being humble," Moette said.

"No, I just have acid reflux from fatty foods," Will replied. "They're bad for my digestion. So, Andy, you're in for dinner, I understand?"

"I was actually hoping to stay for a bit longer," Andy said. And then asked anyway, "Aren't you a janitor, by any chance?"

"It's the badge, right?" Will asked. "Yes, I am. I lost it when cleaning the waiting room a couple years ago. Went out to mop up the mess after the diplomatic slimebug procession, and poof! It was gone. They wouldn't let me back in without my badge, those bastards. Told me I should do their damn acceptance test now to enter."

"The same thing they want from me," Andy said. "What does it even consist of?"

"Ah, a bunch of nonsensical questions all jammed together," Will replied.

"Sounds simple. I'd have no problem

answering a couple of tricky questions.”

“Well, that’s the problem. There aren’t exactly a couple of questions. More like 127,389.”

“How many?” Andy roused. “That’s madness! What do they even want to know?”

“Various important stuff, actually,” Will said. “There’s, for example, a section where you describe your first kiss. Then, there are sections about your everyday habits, your tastes in music, your dominant hand, favorite hair lotions, top three alphabet letters used, twenty one thing you hate about year 2137, all described in detail. I had some problems in the ‘nauseating smells’ section in the past, but that’s just because I rarely ever get nauseated. However, time spent with Moette fixed the issue. Come to think of it, the ‘real facts from Mars Attacks’ section was quite fun, at least the first few hundred times when I took it.”

“Why haven’t you passed it, then, since you know the whole thing so well?”

“That’s the other problem. You must complete the test in one sitting, and while my best time was eight hours eleven minutes thirty two seconds, the working day only lasts a straight eight. A bummer, right?”

It was indeed a huge bummer. Andy drew a deep sigh. Maybe being eaten by an enormous space junk wasn’t as bad as he initially thought it to be. All he wanted is to see some of those tourist attractions on Nabia: the Tiny Canyon, the Statue of Slavery, the Notre Dame De Nabie. Instead, he ended up having to fill in an unfillable form for the rest of his life. Being eaten was

the other option, of course.

“Okay,” Andy said, “that’s it. Moette, you can eat me. Just do me a favor - chop me faster, or whatever it is that you do with food. You can do it for your friend, right?”

“Look how the tables have turned,” Moette said. “Didn’t you say you don’t eat someone you’ve just met?”

“You make an exception when that certain someone asks,” Andy said, “especially if he’s polite and says please. So, *please?*”

“Hey, Andy,” Will said, “I think you’re being too harsh on yourself. Maybe we’ll figure out a way together?”

He stood up and approached the blob, sticking his hand into it.

“Stop it,” Moette said. “It tickles.”

“Where can it be?” Will fumbled inside of the purple jello with intent. “Ah-ha!”

He pulled out a beautiful, exquisite, exotic, luxurious, light-radiating mop. Like a diamond, it sparkled in the lights of the waiting room. Andy could always tell a great mop from an absolutely magnificent mop, and this one was the latter.

“You like it?” Will asked.

“It’s... wonderful,” Andy replied.

“We can both be janitors here,” Will said. “I’ll share food with you, and you’ll do half the work for me. What do you say?”

“You said food?” Andy asked. “Where do you get food?”

“I share some with Will,” Moette said. Andy gulped a giant appetite-killing gulp.

“You’ve got it all wrong, Andy.” Will laughed a crampy laugh. “Moette meant that he leaves me the food that his food brings with it. Sounds confusing, but ain’t



all things at first?"

"You don't say," Andy said. "At least you're fed enough to do your job."

"Yeah," Will said, "it's getting rather boring, sitting all day doing nothing. Besides, Moette provides me with an inexhaustible source of work. You'll get into the way things work soon. So?"

"I... I don't know—"

"It's going to be fun, I promise." Will patted Andy on the back.

"I don't get to eat him, then?" Moette asked. It sounded sad.

"Oh, come on, Moette." Will patted him, too, but his hand slipped through. He almost dived back into the blob, but Moette's tentacle caught him. "All right," Moette said, "Andy seems like a nice fellow."

Andy couldn't decide. Being a space janitor was among his childhood dreams that never came true. All his peers wanted to either be space pirates or interstellar troopers, but all he ever wanted was that mop he saw on the blinking covers of the cyber-magazines. Those covers occupied half of his room. He used to cut them out with cyber-scissors and stick them on his bedroom wall.

The other half was all dedicated to janitors themselves: their teeth white and shiny, their suits perfectly blue and clean, their hair blonde and sparkling like diamond dust. The courageous beings, the space cleaners would've handled danger no matter where it came from. The world was safe in their arms — also, perfectly clean — and Andy wanted to hold the world, too. Maybe

just for a moment.

"I'll do it," Andy said.

"Awesome!" Will exclaimed.

They both grabbed on to the mop, their foreheads touching.

"In the dirtiest storm..." Will said.

"In the slimiest flooding..." Andy said.

"Until the work is done..."

"Until the world is clean..."

"The Janitor stays..."

"The Janitor cleans!"

"You're in, Andy," Will said. "Congrats, dude."

Moette sniveled; it sounded like an awkwardly repressed fart. "I'm going to cry."

"Please don't." Will turned his head towards Moette, forehead still pushing against Andy's. "I don't swim well, as we learned from the last time."

"When do we start?" Andy asked, recoiling.

"Tomorrow," Will said. "Moette, bro — I mean, person — can you take us to my shelter?"

"Sure," Moette said. "Climb on."

It picked them both up in his tentacles. Hanging at a height of several dozen feet wasn't pleasant, but it didn't matter. Andy was a space janitor. Maybe unofficially, maybe trapped for all eternity in this forsaken place, but with his biggest dream finally coming to life.

"Oh, and please, Moette, let's use the external transportation," Will said. "I swallowed just enough of your phlegm for today."

"Strap on your seat belts," Moette said. "The Moette-train is leaving the station in

three – two – one.”

The speed was close to that of an interstellar glider. Andy could barely see anything around him as they flew with their legs dangling in mid-air. He realized he forgot his baggage, but that was of little importance to him right now. Even though the non-existent food inside of him begged to escape the imprisonment of his shrunken stomach, his heart already bled soap foam and his nose smelled the synthetic aromas of vanilla cleaning solution.

Suddenly, they stopped. Will turned green, but that accommodated his hair even more. Andy dug the combination of green and blonde.

“And we’re here,” Moette said.

“Thanks... Moette,” Will uttered, holding down his morning lasagna.

Moette put them both on the ground, and they stood up, dancing the ballet of dizziness. The shelter Will talked about was completely made of paper with words scribbled all over it in black. He managed to build a whole shack with furniture, a dou-

ble-sized bed and, seemingly, a bathroom. Will was the space equivalent of Robinson Crusoe, and Andy had just become his cosmic Friday.

“This is where the tests came in handy,” Will said. “And, what’s even better, I never run out of toilet paper.”

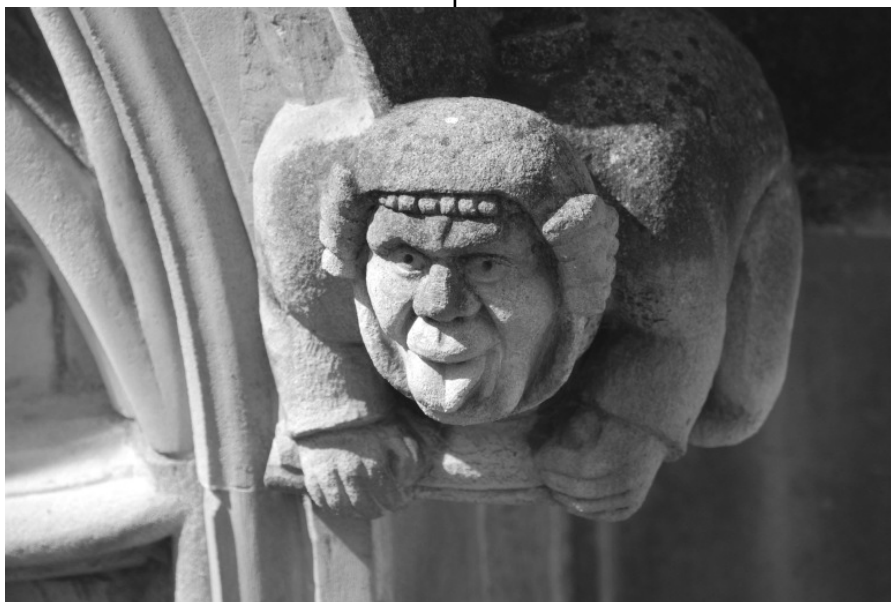
“Sounds really handy,” Andy agreed. He wasn’t lying.

“Guys,” Moette said, “there’s a group of Universe-Asian tourists at the block D189 that just arrived. I can’t miss the eastern delicacies, you know.”

“Go ahead.” Will fell on to his paper bed. “We’re going to sleep, anyway. One more thing, though. Can you please turn the lights off?”

“Sure, friend.” Moette spit its slime at the illumination lines. They sparkled and soon died down, almost as if going into a night light mode. It felt quite cozy. Andy flopped on to the bed near Will, stretching his legs out and placing his hands under his head. Almost like home, he thought.

“Good night, Andy,” Will said, snorting



slightly. "Don't worry about the lights. The service will fix them tomorrow, they always do. And tomorrow will be a great day for us, I'm sure of that."

"Aren't you service, though?" Andy asked.

"I guess so," Will said and stretched a pleased smile across his face. "Let's just sleep on it."

"Good night, brother Janitor," Andy said. "We'll have a great day together."

He lied and stared into the ceiling, where the short circuited lights buzzed. Down the corridor he could hear the muffled sounds of screams that the tourists made while being impaled on to the tentacles and swallowed alive. The voices rose and fell, probably not heard by the citizens of Nabia who all slept at the other side of the tungsten shutters. Andy never heard the sounds of Nabia, so he tried imagining the voices of their life, of their movement. He imagined Nabians snorting and watching explicit content on their floating screens, the sounds of printing machines working to produce another thousand sheets holding the acceptance tests. And behind all of that cacophony was the sound of a thousand hungry purple blobs... no, that was just Will, snoring beside him. Andy quickly realized he wasn't quite in a Hunter S.

Thompson's story, so he just closed his eyes, trying to sleep through the Nabian night.

"Psst," Andy heard Moette's voice squeezing through the loudspeaker, "Andy? Are you sleeping?"

"No," Andy whispered.

"Look," Moette said, "I don't know if I

can trust you but, you see, I can't keep this secret anymore."

"What kind of secret?"

"It's just that... the Will's badge. I stole it."

"But why?"

"I was all alone here, all of that time. He was the only one who treated me well. He never wiped me off the floor or washed me off the windows, you see? He's my only friend, Andy, and he's a good one at that. I'm just afraid he'll leave me forever.

"That's awful, Moette. You need to tell him."

"I know, I know. I'll try. Someday. Just, don't tell him yourself, okay?"

"Fine. Let's sleep, Moette. We'll sleep on it."

"Okay, okay." Andy felt the paper blanket being pulled on to him, as well as the hefty drip of slime on his forehead. "Sleep well, Andy."

"You too, Moette. You too."

Andy slowly began to fall into the land of dreams. He was fighting off the dirt with his new mop back to back with his comrade Will and their sidekick, all-devouring purple blob of a neutral identity called Moette. Together, they made a team worth a thousand teams, and no pollution could have stood against their power. They laughed in the face of danger. Moette laughed, Will laughed and Andy laughed, too. And in that moment, he could have sworn they were infinite.

But he didn't. Just in case. ❖

# THE HONKED

by LEE BLEVINS

The car in front of them didn't even let off the brake before the traffic on the highway closed ranks again.

"I'm gonna honk," said Steve.

"Wait," said Betsy. "Don't do something you might regret."

"We've been sitting here for five minutes and it's like this guy isn't even trying to get out. He's missed several chances. This might deserve a honk."

"You can't honk at someone for being careful. You honk for an accident or a near accident or general jackassery. You don't honk for Sunday driving."

Steve pointed a thumb back over his shoulder.

"There are three cars behind us. If one of them honks, there could be a chain reaction of honks. I'm not going to get honked at because this guy drives like he remembers the dust bowl. And our food's getting cold."

Betsy looked at the side mirror at the line of backed up traffic behind them. The strip mall was busy. Too busy.

"That could be a problem," she said.

"I'll give him one more chance." Steve looked left towards the lane of oncoming traffic speeding down the highway. "The next break, he better take. Otherwise, I'll have to honk."

"I hate the honk," said Betsy.

"No one likes it."

Fifty cars must have passed, one after the other in rapid succession, before any suitable break presented itself. But Steve saw it and he gripped the steering wheel tighter and he felt a heaviness in his foot.

The car in front of them saw it, too. The brake lights blinked. The car inched forward. Betsy smiled.

"See," she said.

And then a work truck swerved into the nearer lane. The car in front of them hit its brakes again.

"Come on," said Steve. "You can make it."

But the car, ever cautious, waited until the truck passed. By then it was too late. The traffic had returned.

Steve looked over at Betsy. Her eyes were wide and her lips were tight. She barely nodded.

Steve pulled his right hand off the steering wheel with a sticky plop and placed its palm over the horn in the center of the steering wheel.

"Okay," he said.

And he honked.

The sonic wave shot out from their front bumper and washed over the car in front of them. Its sides shimmered and undulated as it stretched down the length of

its prey. The brake lights went off again but in vain. In a second, the wave had wrapped itself around the car from bumper to bumper.

The driver looked back up at them in his rear view mirror.

Then the wave contracted, and as it pulled inward its edges crumpled the sides of the car like a taut slinkee released, and then it popped out of existence.

“I had to do it,” said Steve.

He let off the brake and they inched forward until they were almost nosed out onto the highway and then they waited anxiously for their chance to go.

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Dewayne was staring out the driver’s side window, wondering if there were even any red lights left, when he noticed the

sonic wave in his peripheral vision. He had never been in one, of course, but he had seen it happen before. He didn’t get a good look at who had honked at him.

And then he was somewhere else entirely, sitting in traffic that stretched forward and behind and to the left and to the right without end. Everywhere was stalled highway. No one moved forward, not even an inch. The world was one big traffic jam.

Dewayne, like every other driver in every other car there had done and would do again, placed both hands on the horn and he honked.

And he honked.

And he honked.

But all it made was a sound. ❖

**END TRANSMISSION**