

Corner Bar Magazine

Volume 3 Number 2

Page 1 – THE CORNER OF THE ROOM by Joseph Scipione. Mr. Scipione, of Naperville, IL, writes, “I have had short stories published in an anthology of western horror and in New Realms Magazine as well as some other smaller online publications.”

Page 10 – OMEN by Andrew Openshaw. Mr. Openshaw is a copywriter from Newcastle upon Tyne in the UK. An avid reader of fantasy and horror, he is now taking tentative steps into the world of speculative fiction. Married to Josephine, he is a proud parent to the world’s noisiest cats: Maxwell, Molko & Bodhi.

Page 12 – M.O.S.E.S. by D. A. Cairns. Heavy metal lover and cricket tragic, D.A. Cairns lives in Darwin in Australia's Northern Territory, where he works as an English language teacher and writes stories in his very limited spare time. He has had over 50 short stories published (but who's counting right?) His blog, Square Pegs, is at <http://dacairns.blogspot.com.au> and he has authored five novels, Devolution, Loathe Your Neighbor, Ashmore Grief, A Muddy Red River and Love Sick Love which will be available in November, from Rogue Phoenix Press.

Page 19 – RURAL RIGHTS by Darren L. Young. Mr. Young spent his youth in the middle of massive plot of land on the outskirts of a Midwestern town with a declining population measured by three digits. Now he lives in the 5th largest city in the United States and enjoys staying indoors whenever possible. He can be found at www.darrenyoung.com.



“THE CORNER OF THE ROOM”

by JOSEPH SCIPIONE

Catherine was headed to the bathroom in the middle of the night when she heard the paper slip into her dark hotel room. She didn't think much of it, she was checking out of room 1173 in the morning and it was common for hotels to just slide you bill under the door. You didn't really ever check out anymore unless you saw a charge on the bill that shouldn't have been there. She didn't feel like looking at the bill right now, it was hard enough to fall asleep in these hotel rooms, the last thing she needed was to get her mind going again.

After she went used the toilet, she returned to bed and lifted up her phone to check the time, 4:30. She had only been asleep for a few hours. This was where her problems always start. Her mind wouldn't let her fall back asleep. She needed to be up by 6:00 so she could be ready to leave for her meeting at seven. Between showering and getting dressed, doing her hair and make-up and packing because she was leaving after her meeting, it was going to be a busy hour. And now, she only had another hour and a half before she had to be awake to do all of that, and the last time she checked her phone it was after 1:30. It meant she was going to be exhausted; she needed to fall back asleep. But she mind was already awake and thinking about the

day. She lay in bed for the next hour and then decided just to get up so she had a little extra time to get ready.

Catherine got out of bed again, still naked - she hated to sleep with clothes on - and went to the door of her room. The only light in the room was the light from the bathroom, the rest of the room was dark. There were two papers there, the bill, on a full sized piece of paper and then, sitting under the bill, was a smaller piece of paper. She checked the bill first because she had seen this kind of thing before, along with the bill the hotel would hand out coupons usually for a free breakfast or lunch at a restaurant close by or in the hotel itself. It was nothing new. She brought the bill and the smaller paper to her bed and sat down to look it over. Everything seemed fine. She had breakfast yesterday morning in the room and that change was on there, along with the room itself. There were no other charges. She put the bill into her bag with her other work things and then looked at the coupon still in her hand, she didn't think she would have time for breakfast this morning and just planned on grabbing a banana at the front desk along with a big cup of coffee, but she was curious so she turned the coupon over anyway, just to see what the

offer was.

It wasn't a coupon. It was a plain, white half sheet of paper, torn at one edge. Scrawled across the paper were the words:

I CAN SEE YOU.

Catherine physically jumped when she read the words, her eyes looking around the still darkened room. She pulled her feet up on the bed and covered herself back up in the sheets and blankets. Then she leaned over and turned the light next to the bed on, lighting the rest of the room a little more, although there were still some shadows from the angle of the small light. She looked around and her skin crawled. The room was empty, but the realization of what happened at 4:30 hit her and she almost vomited. She'd heard the paper being slipped under the door just as she walked from the bed to the bathroom. She thought it was just the bill, but maybe it wasn't. Maybe someone had watched her naked as she walked by. She pulled the sheets up to her chin and looked over at the door. The light from the hall peeked through the crack underneath, there was no one standing at the door now. It made her feel a little better, but she still didn't know what to do. She reached for the phone and called the front desk. It rang once, twice, three times and then stopped. There was a short click followed by static. Catherine looked at the phone in her hand, then hung it up and called the front desk again. Three rings again then static and she could almost hear the sound of

running water in the background. She replaced the phone and checked the wires, but everything seemed ok.

Fucking old phone. She slammed the headset down.

She checked the time; 5:40, she had to start getting ready soon, but how could she, knowing someone might be watching.

She could call her boyfriend, Mike, but she was on the east coast and he was on the west coast; three hours difference. He would still be sleeping and she didn't want to wake him up. This was a nice hotel - things like this didn't happen at nice hotels. She remembered some female celebrity had something like this happen to her. Some *perv* had flipped the peep hole on the door so that instead of being able to look out at the hall from inside the hotel room, a person in the hall could look into the hotel room. There was a court case about it or something.

Catherine sat there in bed, her mind racing, for the next twenty minutes. She checked her phone again; 6:02. She had to get up now, there was nothing she could do. She would tell the front desk and be on her way. Some guy just got a little peek that was all, he told herself, hoping it would make her feel better. It didn't.

She got out of bed with the sheet wrapped around her, doubled checked the locks on the door and went into the bathroom. She left the sheet around her and pulled the whole thing into the bathroom with her then shut and locked the bathroom door behind her. She breathed a little bit of a sigh knowing for sure that, at least

in here, there was no one watching her. She looked at herself in the mirror -

I look like shit

then dropped the sheet on the floor and turned the shower on. Her heart was racing and she did her best to calm herself down as she waiting for the warm water to kick on. She stuck her hand in to check the temperature of the water, it was warm and she stepped in.

She stood in the warm water longer than she should have. It felt good though. She hung her head and let the hot water run down the back of her head and down her body as she tried to push the thought of the creepy note out of her mind. She also needed to get herself in the right frame of mind to close this deal in a few hours. It was the main reason she was here anyway. It would be a waste if she went through all of this and didn't at least get back to Los Angeles with a nice eight figure deal under her arm.

She turned off the water and pushed the curtain back just a bit to grab a towel. She rubbed it on her face first like she always did and then pushed the curtain the rest of the way open to get out and dry off, but when she looked toward the mirror she screamed, almost falling on the slick floor of the shower. Catherine composed herself as best she could and wrapped the towel around her. She could feel her heart beating and felt as though she was going to throw up. The hot water of the shower felt good but now she was sweating, she needed

to get out of the bathroom but she couldn't. Hanging on the mirror was another small piece of paper with more writing on it: I CAN STILL SEE. Tears of fear welled up in her eyes, she checked the bathroom door - it was still locked from the inside - she didn't know how the note had gotten on the mirror.

"What do I do?" She asked herself aloud in a mixture of sadness and terror. Her lips curled and she could feel the few tears of fear morphing into outright sobbing. The heat and humidity in the room didn't help she went to the mirror and pulled the note down, it looked as though it was the same piece of paper, small and torn at one edge. Whoever had been leaving her notes was walking around with a notepad or something and tearing off pieces of paper to leave for her. This one was taped to the mirror also.

What kind of pervert was this? And how did he get in the bathroom with the door locked?

At first she thought maybe the note was there when she went into the bathroom, not that much of a comfort because it meant the guy got into her room somehow, but at least in meant he didn't get in while she was in the shower. But she remembered looking in the mirror before she got in the shower, the note wasn't there.

The sweat began to drip down her forehead and along the side of her face. She needed to get out of the bathroom. There was also that big deal that she was supposed to close today. That wasn't going to happen if she just stayed in the bathroom.

She didn't really want to, but she felt like she didn't have much of a choice.

Catherine wrapped the towel around herself and took a deep breath, she tightened her lips, not sure what she expected to see when she left the bathroom but knew it had to be done.

Here we go.

When she opened the door the cool air on her wet skin sent a chill down her body. At least she assumed it was the cool air. She looked at the door to the room first. Still locked. Then she turned to face the room itself, half expecting to see a man standing there, maybe with a hard-on and a little pad of paper and a pen, but there was no one there, just her empty hotel room. Her suitcase sat on top of the second bed that she didn't need, the curtains to the window were still drawn closed and the desk had her hair and makeup stuff on it. Everything was just the way she left it. She went around her bed and sat between the two, checking the room for anyone that might be hiding. As her eyes scanned the room she thought she saw a dark spot on the ground in the corner closest to the window. The light next to the bed was bright, but it still cast some shadows in the room, she flipped the larger overhead light on from the switch next to the bed. The room was fully lit. Catherine looked over at the dark spot. It glistened in the bright light, almost like it was wet.

With her towel still wrapped around her she got up off her bed and went over to it. She didn't remember it being there yesterday or the day before when she checked

in. She had a habit of inspecting hotel rooms before staying in them. If she was at home, she would have touched the spot, and maybe smelled it to see what it was, but here in a hotel room, even if it was a nice hotel, she wasn't about to touch any strange wet spots on the floor. But her curiosity was going to get the better of her. She had to know what was going on in this hotel room.

It has to be more than just some pervert.

Catherine went to her suitcase and pulled on a tank top and a pair of gym shorts she brought it case she wanted to work out. Having clothes on made her feel a little less exposed and more willing to investigate what was happening here. She went into the bathroom and grabbed one of the white face cloths she had been provided, if she couldn't touch the wet spot herself, she could at least use the cloth to touch and see what it was. Water, or wine or whatever had been spilled.

It must have been a lot though if it was still wet.

She looked up at the ceiling as she walked back across the room. Maybe it was water dripping down from up above. But the ceiling was dry. She knelt down next in the corner of the room and went to dab the spot with the cloth but the spot was gone.

"What?" Catherine said a loud, her own voice sounded strange to her in the empty room.

She dabbed the floor anyway, but wasn't surprised when nothing came up off the floor. She rubbed her hand on the spot. Dry as a bone.

Maybe I'm just losing my mind.

She walked back around in between the two beds and got dressed for her meeting, she checked her phone again: 6:50. She needed to be out of the hotel room in about ten minutes so that she could get to the meeting on time, it was about thirty minutes away and the meeting was at 8:00. She wanted to make sure she was there early not coming into the meeting five or ten minutes late. After she was dressed she went to the desk to do a quick version of her make up. She picked up her eye-liner first and then, out of shock, dropped it on the floor. The pad of paper that the hotel offered sat on the desk. The top had a header with the name and address of the hotel, but the bottom was blank. Her hand covered her mouth. The first two sheets had been ripped in half, only the top portions of the first two pieces of paper remained.

"What. The. Fuck," Catherine whispered.

She backed away and looked around the room again, she checked under the beds and in the closet and then in the bathroom again. There was nowhere that a person could hide. She checked the lock on the door to the hall again. It was still locked and dead bolted, as it had been all night.

Behind her she felt the air move and thought she sensed movement, she whipped around, there was nothing.

Catherine sat back on the bed, she needed to get out of here, why didn't she just finished getting ready, pack up her

things and leave this place. Whatever was going on here would stay here and she could leave, go to her meeting, close this deal and be home celebrating with Mike later on tonight. This hotel room would not even be remembered as part of this day.

She needed to go, she packed up all of her things, dumping them into her suitcase and zipped it up as best she could, She slipped her phone in the front pouch of her suitcase, then went to the door. She unlocked the deadbolt and then she turned the handle. It didn't move. She did it again, pushing down on the handle as hard as she could but it still didn't move. She was trapped. She looked back to the room and breathed in deep, she would have to figure this out or live through it. Catherine replaced the deadbolt and turned around to face whatever was happening in her room.

Again, she saw movement out of the corner of her eye, near the window, she turned to look but of course there was nothing there. Then the air next to her moved again, she felt her hair move this time, whatever it was, it was getting close to her. She took a sharp breath in and jumped as she turned toward the movement. Again, nothing.

"Cat," she thought she heard a voice whisper out of the air next to her. Not many people called her Cat. Her parents, her brother, Mike and a few close friends.

"What do you want with me?" She returned to the bed, her back against the head board. The sweat that had visited her in the bathroom had returned. She could-

n't move, frozen by what was happening around her. Her eyes darted from one corner of the room to the other.

Am I just going crazy?

She didn't know for sure if what was happening was just in her head. She didn't think so and she touched the paper notes so it couldn't be all in her head.

"Cat," the not-quite-there voice whispered again.

Catherine yelped and pulled the blankets up around her and tucked them under her chin so only her face was exposed to see if anything else happened in the hotel room. Her meeting was all but forgotten. She didn't know what time it was or if she was going to get out of this room at all let alone finish getting ready and get to the meeting on time. It didn't matter too much to her at this moment anyway, she couldn't move if she wanted to. The only part of her body that wasn't frozen in fear of what might happen next was her eyes. She could feel how wide open they were, darting back and forth from one part of the room to the other as air around her continued to move and light, barely-audible whispers called out to her.

Then she heard a different noise. Soft intermittent clicks. Like the gentle tap of a spoon against a wooden kitchen table. At first she thought they were not really part of what was going on in the room, just the heater clicking on or someone in the room above taking a shower. The clicks grew louder and faster until the sound filled the room. The clicks hurt her ears and she slid her hands up out of the covers and over

her ears to drown out the sound. Part of her wanted to close her eyes too. She just wanted to crawl under the blankets and stay there until whatever was happening in the room stopped and then just run out of the room and leave her things behind. But she couldn't, she was too afraid to close her eyes, at least with her eyes open she would be able to see whatever was going to happen to her. With her eyes closed, her fate would be a surprise.

Even through the fingers that plugged her ears, she could hear the clicks. The loud constant noise was unsettling but it seemed as though the movement around her had stopped with the start of the clicks. The sound became almost hypnotic and even soothing, calming Catherine if only a little. Then the clicking stopped.

She left her fingers in her ears but looked around again, waiting for something to happen. She didn't move for at least a minute. The clicks did not return and Catherine made a decision to pull her fingers out of her ears. The clicks were gone, but they were replaced with a new sound. Running water. Not running water like a sink, running water like she was next to a fast moving stream. She didn't dare move, but when she heard the moving water her eyes went right to the corner of the room that had looked wet earlier. *Was that really only a few minutes ago?*

Just as the clicking had gotten louder, the sound of the water got louder and more violent sounding. She wanted to get up, to look in that corner of the room, but she couldn't. Catherine felt the sweat drip

down from her forehead to her cheek. Her legs and feet were sweating too under the warmth of the blanket but she still didn't move even as the sound of the water grew louder. After what felt like ten minutes of listening to the water run in the corner of her room she forced herself to get up out of bed.

Don't be an idiot Catherine, just leave.

But she couldn't leave the door wouldn't budge.

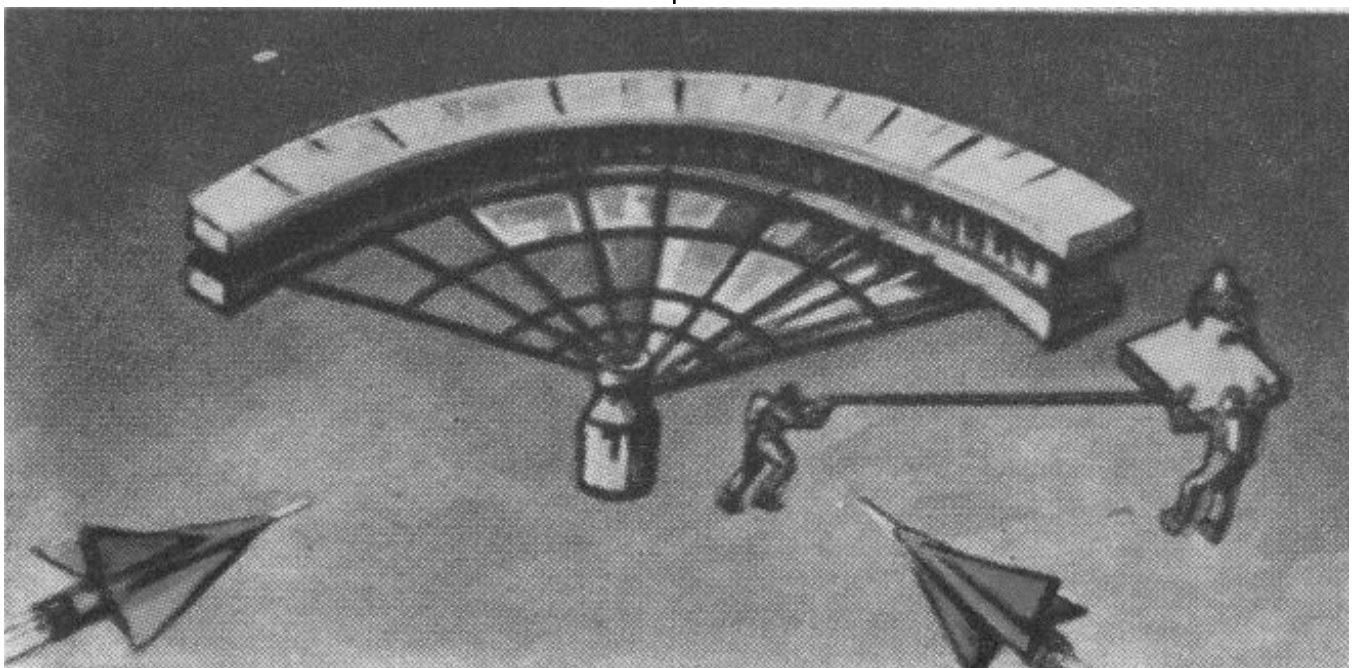
The sound of the water was deafening. If there had been someone else in the room with her she would have had to shout for them to hear her talking. It was that loud. She'd been to Niagara Falls once as a kid with her family and been through the tunnels that led right behind the falls, this was louder. She took another look at the door and then turned back toward the sound, she knew she shouldn't, but she stepped forward.

The floor started to shake and rumble

as Catherine drew closer. Drops of water were flitting up into the air, it reminded her again of Niagara Falls, the white water moving so fast, with such force.

Holy Shit. Holy Shit.

She was across the room and able to see the corner, it was as if a large fast moving river had cut its way through the wall of room 1173. The space was only about three feet by three feet, but the sound it produced was much more than that. Catherine wondered what was on the other side of the walls. She watched the water swirl and ripple past, spraying up mist that she felt on her bare legs. Then she saw it. Movement. Something was in there. Whatever fear she felt earlier with the notes and the feeling that someone was there had left her, curiosity had taken over. She leaned over, just a little bit. She didn't want to fall in but she had to know what was in there moving around. She got closer, even thought of kneeling down but decided



against it. Then a gray hand reached up out of the water and grabbed ahold of the floor as if it was struggling to get out.

Catherine jumped back. The back of her legs hit the bed behind her and she scrambled up on top of the bed as she watched the water, frozen in fear yet again.

Another hand joined the first, water dipped off the arms and onto the carpet. Catherine could see the blue veins in the arms under the gray skin. Then the things head broke the surface of the flowing water. At first all she could see was the wet, black hair. Then its face. She would never call it a person. Its long black hair was matted to its skull and stuck to one side of its face as the current pushed against it. The things eyes were a milky white, no evidence of pupils, just wide white globes focused right back at her as she stared. She tried to scream, tried to run but she couldn't, she just stared.

The thing pushed itself up further out of the water. Its face, like its arms, was traced with both dark and light blue veins beneath the gray dripping skin. Its mouth was a collection of yellow rotting teeth, behind that Catherine could make out the black snake-like tongue that seemed a little too big for the things mouth. She still couldn't move, but as it drew closer she found herself able to speak.

"What- what do you want?" She forced the words out of her mouth in what amounted to not much more than a whisper.

Water fell out of the things mouth and dripped onto the floor, it continued to

drool, a long line of saliva stretched from its mouth to the floor and remained there as it spoke.

"Come join us Cat." It breathed in short muffled words. The thing reached out its hand and its finger was just able to graze Catherine's ankle, leave a cool wet streak along her skin.

"No!" She shouted. That had been what she needed to unfreeze her terrified body. She kicked away the hand, one of her heels falling off and onto the floor next to the rushing water and scrambled from one bed to the other. The thing still moved toward her, rising up out of water in into the hotel room. She got off the other bed and reached for her suitcase.

She grabbed the suitcase with one hand and pulled it as she kicked off her other heel. She took the few steps to the door and pulled, forgetting it she couldn't get out last time she tried. She pulled hard but forgot about the deadbolt. She fumbled with the chain and looked back. The thing was out of the water and making a slow shuffle toward her. The sound of the water was the loudest it had been. The room was filling with water; the rug underneath her feet was wet. Catherine turned back toward the door and slid the chain off of the track. The cold water now covered her feet and was moving fast up her calves.

Catherine turned the handle of the door and it moved this time. She pulled the door open but the gush of water against it pushed it back closed.

"No!" She screamed and pulled the door open again with more force this time.

The water was at her waist and her hands were wet, the door handle slipped from her grip and slammed closed. She turned. The thing was just at the other end of the short hall at the entrance to the room. Its grotesque, yellow smile plastered on its face. It spoke again.

“Join us Cat,” it said. This time the long snake-like tongue was more visible, as if trying to escape its mouth.

Catherine said nothing and turned



back toward the door, her only escape. She pulled once more but with the water up at her breasts, she couldn't even move it. She shivered as the freezing water climbed higher on her body. She tilted her head back so that she could breathe as the water rose up to her neck. The thing just stared at her. She kicked and slammed her hands against the door hoping someone from outside would hear her as she felt her feet leave the floor. The ceiling of room 1173 drew closer.

She kicked the door as she floated up.

Her eyes were drawn back to where the thing had been but it was gone. Then she felt the cool touch against her leg. The thing was in the water with her. Catherine kicked and thrashed her legs, trying to keep the thing away from her. Her head was pressed against the ceiling and the water showed no sign of going down.

She tried to scream again but her mouth filled with water, there was no more air in the room. Catherine coughed, closed her mouth and held her breath. She opened her eyes but saw nothing but darkness. The room was silent now, the sound of rushing water had disappeared and the once cold water now felt warm as it surrounded her. She turned back toward the door banging as hard as she could, already feeling like she couldn't hold her breath any longer. Two hands wrapped themselves around her calves. Her legs thrashed and kicked at the hand, her fists doing the same thing to the door but she wasn't strong enough. The thing pulled her back fast, away from the door, back to the corner of the room, and down.

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“OMEN”

by ANDREW OPENSHAW

The first incident happened two years ago, just after his first birthday. I was cleaning the banister when he began circling my feet and meowing. He'd always been a laid-back cat, so this was an unusual thing for him to do. I just patted his head, reassuring him that I'd serve his dinner as soon as I finished.

His pacing became frantic, he started hitting his head against my shin like he was trying to get me to move. In the end, I did, just as the loft hatch blew open and the ladders came falling out, missing my head by an inch.

The girls laughed when I told them. “Cats don't care about your well-being,” they said. “He just needed feeding, that's all.”

Weeks later, when I'd forgotten the episode, he saved me again. While I was getting ready for a night out with Gracie, he started pacing around the bedroom. He was getting in my way, so I shooed him downstairs.

When the taxi came, I dashed down into the hall and there he was, stood in front of the door. I walked towards him and he hissed. Another step and he puffed into a ball, tail fanned out like a brush, wide worrying eyes.

Memories of the ladder came rushing

back. I retreated to the living room and texted Gracie to tell her I was ill.

The following morning the news reported an accident on the ring road. Among those killed was a taxi driver, I didn't bother reading on to find out which firm.

After that, these events became more frequent. I didn't tell anyone, instead reveling in my luck of having such a clever kitty. A guardian angel, with cute pointy ears. Then June 16th, 2015 came and everything changed. Donald Trump announced he was running for president.

The cat had been in a mood all that day, but when I turned on CNN to watch the speech he flew into a rage. Knocking over candles, pushing magazines to the floor and hissing at the TV. “Don't worry about nasty mister Trump”, I said, stroking him. “He'll never win.”

Months went by and Trump's popularity grew and grew. The cat stopped eating and started sleeping more. He'd been in the spare room sulking for two days when Cassie came over a few months ago.

Emerging from his slumber, he padded down the stairs to join us. Jumping onto the coffee table, he let Cassie stroke him. The Washington Post lay open on the floor, Trump's face rearing out of the print.

Leaping off the table, the cat attacked the paper, ripping and slashing until it was a pile of shreds.

He stared up at us with pleading eyes. Cassie just shrieked and clapped her hands. "What a clever kitty!" she cried.

The cat just slumped down on the torn pieces, placing his front paws on his head in a gesture of despondence. "Amazing!" Cassie screamed. She grabbed her phone and took a picture. It got fifty likes on Instagram in under an hour.

I should never have named my cat Omen. This last year has been especially agonising, witnessing the burden of pre-science crush his eager spirit. It was all clear now. He was warning me, warning everyone. Trying to project, through his wailing and random bursts of violence, a message. "Don't be complacent. Act now and you could stop this."

Unable to sleep after the events yesterday, I came downstairs early, just as the sun rose. Sat in my seat facing the window, my eyes became transfixed by the effulgent dawn. Purples, reds, striking oranges shimmered about the creeping blue. A beautiful day for the start of a new era.

He materialised in front of me. Airbrushed into the scene, his sleek black fur still, not a single hair out of place. Perched on the window ledge, staring out at the burning skies, he let out a heart-wrenching howl, shattering the tranquillity. It lasted several seconds, slowly turning into a low chilling moan.

When he turned to face me, I noticed tiny pearls of water tumbling from his hir-

sute face. Resentment and defeat oozing from his flavescent glistening eyes. Cats cannot cry, but Omen wasn't like other cats.

His tears started me off. "I'm sorry Omen", I whispered through sobs. "Oh God, what horrible future have you seen!"

Hours later I woke up, still in the seat. Omen had gone. I turned on the TV just as the CNN anchor broke the news;

"Donald's election trumped. A video of a cat, who appears to jump deliberately to its death from the Tobin bridge, has gone viral today. The hashtag #suicidecat was the number one trending topic on Twitter at lunchtime, ahead of yesterday's election of Donald Trump as the 45th president of the United States. In an attempt to regain the limelight, President-elect Trump issued a typically controversial Tweet suggesting Hillary Clinton should join suicide cat at the bottom of the Mystic River, following her resounding defeat."



“M.O.S.E.S.”

by D.A.CAIRNS

“I know it sounds bad - like an Orwellian nightmare - but seriously, it’s a good thing. It’s great! You’ll see.”

Marshall Staunton was as unimpressed by the enthusiastic sales pitch as he had been by the frightful piece of propaganda he had read in the *Terminal Star*. That was why he had come. Trashy rag of a publication though it very definitely was, Marshall, as an obsessively curious freelance journalist, was nonetheless compelled to investigate the story of M.O.S.E.S. Mobile Orbital Surveillance Entities. Even the acronym, though no doubt intended to be cute and non-threatening, was appalling. The epitome of tackiness.

“Come along, Mr. Staunton,” gushed Billy, his guide and host in *Terminal*.

“Call me Marshall, son.”

What the hell kind of name for a town was *Terminal* anyway? Terminal disease? Terminal velocity? Bus Terminal? Yet Terminal was allegedly the home of the most fantastic, and mankind benefitting technology in decades: M.O.S.E.S. Marshall was impervious to sensationalism, and suspicious, even cynical by nature. The hype held no magical allure for him. He was here to see for himself what all the fuss was about, and to report the facts.

The two men reached a building which

was magnificently designed: frightening in height and dazzling from reflected sunshine. Staunton had never felt comfortable with such gravity defying edifices. Despite the trite illogicality of the belief that the laws of the universe were immutable, he still worried about gravity’s smouldering anger at the arrogant interference of engineers.

“Looks like it would piss gravity right off, don’t you think?” suggested Marshall as he gestured towards the sky and the barely visible top of the tower.

“Sir, you have used a grade 1 prohibited word in a public place.”

Staunton turned around quickly to look at Billy, though he knew it was not Billy who had reprimanded him. Billy was beaming.

“What the fuck?”

“Sir, you have used a grade 3 prohibited word in a public place. Please refrain from using coarse language as it may cause offence.”

Marshall’s frantic yet vain search for the origin of the voice ended when he caught Billy’s eye. He followed Billy’s jabbing thumb into the sky and came face to face, in a manner of speaking, with his first M.O.S.E. His jaw dropped. “You’re shitting me!”

“Sir, you have used a grade 2 prohibited word in a public place. This is your third offence. A demerit has been recorded and you are now ineligible for Terminal Citizen of the Year.”

Marshall, who had been waving his hand in a placatory manner whilst mimicking the M.O.S.E, broke off and laughed when he caught those last words. The M.O.S.E. had not finished though.

“Further breaches of the public decency code will result in physical punishment. Although this will hurt, it will not hurt you. Please say yes to indicate comprehension.”

Curiosity could be a wicked beast sometimes, a demon driving rational men to acts of insanity. Marshall was leaning over the precipice, contemplating how bad this physical punishment might actually be. The rebellious little boy inside, egged him to push the envelope. He was sorely tempted. Whoever controlled this thing would surely not injure people. Not for swearing. Marshall looked at Billy who was still smiling.

“You like this, do you kid? Being followed around and spied on by a metal eyeball. Being told off by a digitized dwarf dictator?” Marshall smiled to himself. He liked that. He would have to remember it for his story.

“I think you’ll find,” said Billy, wisely choosing to ignore Staunton’s rhetoric, “that the M.O.S.E is still waiting for your answer.”

Marshall scratched his head theatrically, before gazing up at the M.O.S.E. “Shit

yeah, I get it.”

This comment was immediately followed by a yelp as M.O.S.E. zapped Marshall Staunton and he crumpled to the ground, though more in shock than pain. Marshall grumbled to himself as he rose, “Is that all you’ve got?”

Billy assisted Marshall to his feet and enquired as to his health, like a good host. ‘Sorry Marshall but you were warned, and that charge was only a minor one. M.O.S.E.S is capable of much more powerful energy bursts.’

‘How powerful?’

Billy rolled up his shirt sleeve to reveal a five centimeter scar just above his wrist. The two men nodded to each other. “Would you like to learn more about M.O.S.E.S?”

The sting had faded quickly, and left no mark on Marshall’s wrist. He thought about Billy’s scar and wondered about the targeting of the wrist. He shuddered when he reached the obvious conclusion. Increasing power applied to the wrist; from a needle prick to a deep gash, to amputation of the hand. God forbid! Had they lost their minds? Clearly M.O.S.E.S was not to be trifled with: lacking both a sense of humour and a sense of irony, not to mention fairness. There appeared not to be grey areas within which a human judge could exercise discernment. How the hell did the residents of Terminal allow this heinous violation of human rights to happen? This was a desecration of their personal space, an abuse of fundamental freedom. It was bloody outrageous, that’s what it was.

“Yes, Billy,” replied Marshall with forced calmness, “I would love to learn more about your...” pint-sized little Nazis was the first thing that sprang to his mind but he went with the second instead, “...wonderful public decency watchdogs.” He looked up and winked at the M.O.S.E. before gesturing for Billy to lead on.

Inside the concrete, steel and glass behemoth, Staunton further pondered the situation. This Draconian attitude by the authorities, as personified by the existence and operation of M.O.S.E.S, which was incidentally an extraordinary piece of technology, was surely a massive overreaction to a problem which could not have conceivably been so dire. To what depths of societal disease had this community descended to require such a radical and dehumanizing cure?

The elevator took them to the 149th floor in the blink of an eye, leaving the contents of Marshall’s stomach behind on the launch pad. It stopped so quickly and smoothly that it was impossible to believe it had been moving at all. Marshall swallowed and opened his eyes. The doors parted silently and Billy stepped out into a cavernous room which appeared to occupy the entire floor. Sparsely furnished and dimly lit, Marshall marveled at the way his size elevens made no sound on the hard floor as he followed his guide. The silence was ominous. A pang of fear pierced him.

“Come and stand here, Marshall,” said Billy. “Beside me.”

Trepidation had retarded his momentum. Though he had not realized, Marshall

had lagged behind. He took up the position as suggested by Billy, and then, as the lights came up, he was rendered speechless. The most enormous bank of television monitors he had ever seen confronted him with all the subtlety of a lightning strike. He didn’t know where to look. The shifting colours provided a kaleidoscope which his eyes could not process: a hailstorm of visual arrows. Marshall placed one hand over his eyes, and the other on his turbulent stomach.

“Each M.O.S.E. has four screens,” began Billy. “When you are logged in as an authorized viewer, you can receive the images from an individual unit. Watch.”

Reluctant though he was, Marshall opened his eyes and watched as one of the monitors. “Is it moving?”

“Yes, and no.”

“Do me a favour Billy. Do the words sensory overload mean anything to you?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Well is it moving or not?”

“The monitors are fixed but the images are being transported forward towards holographic image collectors. So, in a sense they are moving.”

Staunton could barely manage to nod his head. “I need a drink.”

“Of course, forgive me. What would you like?”

“Something very strong.”

“Let double-malted scotch whiskey come,” said Billy. “You must have a lot of questions Marshall.”

Billy looked hurt by his laughter. “Sorry kid but this is one hell of a trip.

Can I say hell?"

"You can say whatever you like in here."

"No shit!"

"No. No M.O.S.E.S.. No worries," said Billy. He turned his head briefly, then added, "Your drink is ready. Shall we take a load off?"

The floor and a narrow shaft of surrounding air space illuminated as they moved. A low table appeared, crowned with a short glass of brown liquid and flanked by two luxurious armchairs. Marshall sat and gratefully sipped the whiskey, savouring its bite. The alcohol resurrected the journalist within while simultaneously banishing the stunned tourist.

"Who has access to this room?"

"Authorized persons and their approved guests."

Marshall smiled. "Okay smart arse. Who does the authorizing and approving?"

"The Minister of Public Decency."

He shook his head and took another draught of his whiskey. "Tell me the history of M.O.S.E.S." He pulled a digital pad from his pocket. "Can I record this?"

Billy nodded, and began his narrative.

In 2019 there had been an event called the Dirty Feet Rebellion. The name was intriguing and amusing. Marshall, having not heard of it, presumed Billy was referring to some sort of local uprising which must have occurred in Terminal around the same time that many such mini revolutions were occurring around Australia. Only those disturbances which transpired in major cities had been widely reported. In

any case, Marshall had still been in primary school at the time so his recollections were vague at best. Basically, the so called underclass of society, the fringe dwellers and misfits, had attempted to escape from their marginalized position via a series of sustained and deliberate acts of public indecency. They not only smoked cigarettes, for example, but did so wherever and whenever they wanted to. They consumed alcohol in alcohol free zones, they eschewed the use of garbage bins, preferring the freedom of careless littering. They had loud conversations in public places which were infested with colourful language, and covered taboo topics. They didn't wash their clothes or their bodies unless they felt like it, and apparently they didn't feel like it very often. Marshall had read some of these details in historical accounts of that period but found himself shocked nonetheless by Billy's description of the Dirty Feet people's behavior. No doubt, he embellished the truth for emphasis but it was still unpleasant to think of such uncivilized behavior being foisted upon the hoi polloi.

"The response of the Terminal Government at the time was pusillanimous, and as a result the Dirty Feet ruled the streets."

"Good word, Billy."

"A man called Arch Bounty began his private mission to overthrow the Dirty Feet Rebellion and restore order in Terminal. Driven by a fierce loathing of the *degenerates*, as he called them, he started work on the development of a weapon to use against them."

An alarm sounded. Billy immediately stopped speaking and listened. Marshall watched his expression of pride dissolve into concern. He stood and Marshall stood with him. ‘What’s wrong?’

“Major incident alert. Baan Baan Street. Town Hall. All handlers must report immediately to designated stations and log in.”

“The tour is over, Marshall. Follow me, please.”

“Wait, what’s happening?”

“Display images from all units in Baan Baan Street,” said Billy. “See for yourself, Marshall.”



Multiple screens floated into view revealing scenes of a large gathering of people. Shouting. Jostling. M.O.S.E.S. were hovering menacingly. There was so much noise that Marshall could not make out any discrete sounds, but he recognized a riot when he saw one.

“Dirty Feet?”

“It’s time to leave. I have to report for duty.”

“So you’re one of these handlers?”

Billy was hurrying away before Marshall had finished his question, calling over his shoulder. “Let’s go Marshall.”

Inside the elevator, the alarm sounded louder, more urgent and Billy shuffled and kicked at the carpeted floor. At the bottom, he ushered Marshall out where he was met by a uniformed guard who took his arm and marched him away. He glanced back over his shoulder to see the elevators doors snap shut.

“Please return to your accommodation and wait for Mr. Hughes to summon you,” said the guard as they exited the building and rushed across the footpath to a waiting taxi. The door opened and the guard gently pushed Marshall inside. The driver issued a friendly hello and announced Staunton’s destination.

Marshall Staunton was fuming over his treatment, yet also exhilarated by the prospect of covering a bigger story than the one for which he had come to Terminal. His heart was pounding. Stuff waiting at the hotel! There was no way he was going to sit this one out. “Take me to Town Hall, driver.”

“All the streets surrounding the Town hall are blocked to all but authorized personnel.”

“What about their *approved guests*?”

“Huh?”

“Just get me as close as you can.”

Five minutes later, the taxi was halted by a roadblock manned by armed police

officers. The driver redundantly advised Marshall that this was as far as he could go, so Marshall paid the fare and thanked him before leaping out into the arms of one of the officers.

“You’d be better off back in the taxi and heading somewhere else sir,” suggested the policeman.

“I’m a reporter.”

“Congratulations. I’m a police officer. Return to the cab and leave the area please sir.”

When Marshall stood his ground, the officer ripped a tazer from his belt and pointed it at him.

“What’s with Terminal and electrical charges?”

“Please leave the area.”

“This is bullshit!”

“Sir, you have used a grade two prohibited word in a public place. This is your first warning.”

Marshall had not noticed the M.O.S.E. arrive but recognized the digitized voice. He looked up and impulsively decided to make a run for it. He didn’t know where he was going, other than in the general direction of the thunderous roar of an angry mob which filled the air and echoed through the streets. Adrenalized, he powered away from the roadblock, and was surprised when he stole a look over his shoulder to see that he was not being pursued.

“Sir you have been asked by an agent of the state to leave this area. You are in violation of Terminal public order law.”

He wondered why it had taken so long, but it did not matter as Marshall was now

faced with the problem of imminent pain. To ignore the M.O.S.E. was to invite punishment. He looked around for some shelter, for some place the M.O.S.E. would not be able to follow. He had been running so fast that he had not paid any attention at all to his surroundings. He now noticed he was on a shopping strip and there was a plethora of doors through which he could escape and hopefully shut out the annoying flying policeman. The first door he tried was locked. It was a Hair Salon. A closer inspection revealed no one inside. A second later he was struck down by a sharp pain in his thigh. He could smell burnt fabric. He scrambled to his feet and ran to the next door and pushed, but it too was locked. Marshall made it as far as the candle shop when a second searing burst of electricity sliced a neat gash in his thigh. He stared at the blood flowing from the wound as he slumped against the glassed front panel of the shop.

“Bloody hell!”

“Sir, you have used a grade one prohibited word in a public place.”

Marshall laughed before struggling to his feet and continuing his flight. A gadget shop appeared before him and he fell through the door and crashed onto the floor. Blinded by pain. Confused, he rolled onto his back and stared back at the door. It was closed.

“God, I hate those things!”

The male voice was unfamiliar. “Here let’s get you fixed up. Can you walk?”

Marshall nodded, then allowed the man to assist him to his feet and the two

shuffled slowly to the back of the shop.

“It can’t come in, right?”

“It’s private space.”

The sound of a television entered his ears and Marshall tuned in. “Town Hall? What’s going on?”

“The Dirty Feet are trying another of their pathetic little revolutions.”

“You don’t support them?”

“Oh, I support them one hundred percent, but there’s no point fighting M.O.S.E.S. Like the Pharaoh trying to stop Moses leading the Israelites out of Egypt in that old Bible story, you know the one? Anyway, it’s futile. Every few months or so, they have another crack. Lose a few more good people, and run off with their tails between their legs.”

“Lose?”

“Permanently lose.”

“M.O.S.E.S kill people?”

“You sound surprised.”

Marshall lapsed into silence and allowed the man to treat his wound. The painkiller he offered was powerful and immediately effective. The man explained it was an illegal but perfectly safe drug called *Heroin*. Marshall Staunton’s head was spinning, and while the man explained that it was temporary side effect of the drug, Marshall thought it was just as likely to be a side effect of the unbelievable chain of events in which he had become entwined since arriving in Terminal.

“How long will it take?”

“The riot? The authorities will re-establish control and disperse the crowd in less than an hour if they follow their usual plan

of action.”

The two men sat quietly and watched the action from Town Hall. Countless M.O.S.E.S filled the sky and when they began firing, the cameras continued to roll. Close ups of anguished faces and torn flesh. Vivid pictures of the dead and the dying. More shots of fleeing rioters. More of them being mowed down by M.O.S.E.S. Marshall felt sick and though tears burned his eyes, he could not look away. Soon it was over, just as the man had predicted, and Marshall felt hollow, as though his insides had been scooped out and discarded. The man offered to call him a taxi and assured him that it was quite safe to travel now. He tried to thank the man who had saved his life, but the latter insisted it was nothing, before suggesting that Marshall go home and tell the world his story about Terminal. Marshall did not understand how, if this violent crushing of protests was a regular event, the world had not already heard about it. Then it hit him, and he collapsed to the floor, smashed by the truth of his predicament. No one knew he was in Terminal.

“Whoa,” said the man cheerily, “Maybe you should stay a little longer.”

Marshall’s phone rang suddenly, startling him. When he answered, he heard Billy’s voice asking him an unexpected question: “Are you ready to continue your tour Marshall?” ❖

“RURAL RIGHTS”

by DARREN L. YOUNG

Three graduates from the class of 2055 were gathered in a hay field on the edge of a forest. They sat surrounding a bonfire with a pile of camping gear off to the side. The sky was clear.

“You know what I wish?” Annabelle asked gazing upward. She paused and waited for a reply, or permission to answer.

“That more people would show up?” Rich said as he kicked up some dirt toward the fire. A handful of sparks flared up out of control.

Overhead the atmosphere was illuminated by countless stars, and a sprinkling of space debris.

Rob leaned toward Annabelle and softly asked, “What’s your wish cadet?”

“That more people had their questions answered,” she burst out arms spread wide.

Rich cleared his throat and said, “That’s a great thought and all, but it ain’t how things work,” in a matter-o-fact tone.

Rob glared from his collapsible chair.

“My uncle Bob, my grandpa, nobody in my family except my Ma,” Annabelle began.

“Tell me again, what did you Mom find out?” Rob coaxed.

“Well, she wanted to know if she would be loved,” Annabelle said.

Rich snorted and asked, “What kinda question is that?” He cracked open a zero

calorie beer, “The all powerful Oracle could have told her anything!”

“She’s lucky to have gotten the opportunity,” Rob said.

“It made her happy,” Annabelle said.

“My parents made it clear from day one why we stay out of the city,” Rich said and raised his beer. “Technology can’t teach us how to live.”

“Yeah, but a self-learning AI that can calculate exponentially faster every moment of its existence . . .” Rob said.

“They say time is irrelevant for it,” Annabelle broke in, “that’s how it can predict our futures.”

“And we’re lucky that the members of the council behind the program were able to put safeguards in place,” Rob stated.

“I don’t care what it can do or how it protects us,” Rich said leaning forward, “if we still had meaningful work,” he leaned back into the chair. “My Pa says it was better back then.”

“My aunt Jenny still prays,” Annabelle said. “The Oracle hasn’t spoken to her yet.”

“Wonder why,” Rich muttered.

Annabelle shrugged and turned toward the fire.

There was a sound of crickets in the background, possibly artificial.

Rob broke the silence with a laugh,

then said, "Looks like your wish is going to be answered Rich," he nodded upward to direct their eyes forward.

A holographic display appeared to one side of the campfire. There were two identical teenage males, life-sized, one holding the other in a sleeper hold.

"I caught him. Bringing him in for the reward," one twin said.

The hologram faded.

"Looks like the twins are ready to party," Annabelle observed.

Rich smirked on the sly with one side of his face away from the others. Then he said, "Couldn't they catch some girls or something?"

Rob stood and picked up a recycled log. He tossed it into the fire and said, "Hey Rich, the twins said they tried you first, but didn't get a response."

Rich looked down and then turned away.

After a moments hesitation Annabelle chimed in, "He's gone rogue!"

Rob remained standing. "You disconnected?" he asked.

A light breeze rustled some leaves in trees overhead.

"Oh I can't wait to tell the twins!" Annabelle said and clapped her hands together in a manic burst.

Rich maintained the same position facing the flames without expression. Then he

reached down and grabbed his beer. He took a swig and then looked up with disgust. "You guys ever wonder what happens if somebody don't want to know?"

"What are you talking about?" Rob asked.

"I mean to live naturally," Rich said.

"Information is everything," Rob responded with rising intonation. "What else is there?"

Annabelle also stood up. She clasped her hands over her mouth.

"Answer the question man. Why are you offline?" Rob demanded.

"Has the Oracle . . .?"

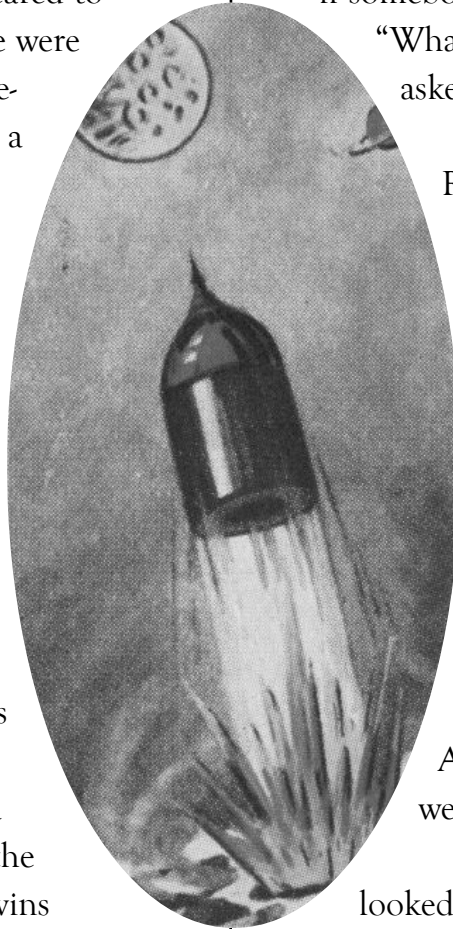
Annabelle began. Her eyelids were forced open all the way.

Rich remained silent. He looked beyond the fire and across an open field. Then he pointed.

First, lights appeared in the distance. Then the twang of country guitars became audible. Soon this noise was accompanied by the squealing of an electric engine. Finally, a jacked up 4x4 pickup came bounding over the grassy hills leading toward the campsite. There was an American flag waving above from within the bed. The truck stomped to a halt with the music blaring at a deafening level. As the cloud of dust began to settle, a pair of identical males jumped out of the cab.

"Hey!" Annabelle waved.

Without saying a word they slapped



hands overhead and formed a tag-team. They rushed toward the campfire, clothes-lined Rich and wrestled him out of his seat. Then one placed him in a rear naked choke hold.

Rich flopped with loose arms and shoulders until he broke free. Then he socked each twin in the stomach.

“Underclassmen just never learn,” Rich said as he brushed his hands off.

As the twins bent over clutching at their midsections, two fembots in cheerleader outfits bounced up from the bed of the pickup with pom poms in hand.

A jar of moonshine was passed around and everyone began swigging it straight. The twins and fembots grinded in tune until the container was empty.

Rich, Annabelle and Rob sat back down.

But the twins kept at it. One retrieved a fully automatic laser sniper rifle. The other lit up a nearby open field with a billion lumen spotlight. Then they both target practiced on a dozen drone pigeons before bagging a few tag-and-release cyborg bucks. The fembots cheered them on.

Meanwhile the conversation at the campfire resumed.

“Does it bother anybody here that we don’t have a clue how all this technology works?” Rich asked.

“Why?” Annabelle began, “This technology lets us to do as we please.”

“She’s right,” Rob said. “The information is all available, you just have to think and the answer appears.”

“Yeah, that’s just it,” Rich remarked.

“Instant gratification, no work required.”

The twins, satiated of bloodlust, made their way over and stood panting by the fire.

“Life before the singularity must have been so lame!” one of the twins shouted as he smacked a fembot on the behind.

“Hey that reminds me!” Rob said with a finger up in the air, “Rich weren’t you going to tell us something?”

All eyes turned toward Rich.

The music faded into the background.

“Yeah,” the twins said. “Why didn’t you respond to us?”

“May be,” Annabelle whispered, “Oracle related.”

The twins decided they had waited for long enough. They turned away from the fire and huddled together for a moment. Then they broke their huddle with, “One, two, three . . . Truth!”

They started toward Rich.

Rich cursed, then stood from his chair and assumed a fighting stance.

“Buddy we have the right to know what you’re thinking,” Rob said.

As the twins closed in, Rich tossed his beer toward their feet in a distraction attempt.

Then the twins jumped, both at once.

Rich side-stepped toward the fire, avoiding the attack. He bent over and grabbed a stick that was half-way lit. He waved the flaming spear with two hands out in front.

“Alright, this is goin’ too far,” Rich said in an unsteady voice.

Right away the twins held up their hands and retreated.

“C’mon man,” Rob pleaded.

Rich grabbed the bag containing his sleeping gear and strapped it on. Torch in hand, he began walking into the forest.

One of the fembots rushed after him. “I’ll make sure he’s okay,” she yelled out to the group as she ran after Rich.

Rich stopped walking once the fire was out of sight. It was silent, not even a cricket chirped. He laid out his sleeping bag. The fembot waited by his side.

Then they laid down together.

“I’m about to reach the age where I strike out on my own,” Rich started “But I’ll still be provided for by the government – I got no choice. You find that depressing?”

The fembot snuggled in close and asked, “Why?”

“Because a man needs to do his own thing,” Rich stated with annoyance.

The fembot put a finger to his lips, then followed with a kiss.

The next act was free of both speech and passion.

Afterward the fembot went into hibernation.

Rich kicked his feet around for a bit, then he turned to one side and switched on his neural link to the information world.

The display within his mind’s eye was still the same as before. All functionality was locked, only the words *Maturity reached. Ask now or forever hold your peace* appeared. There was a blank dialogue box below.

Rich cursed quietly. Then he thought and filled the space with the question:

Will people ever respect me?

He didn’t know how much time had passed, but when he regained consciousness he was covered in bodily fluid(s).

Functionality had returned to his neural link, and without thinking, for the first time Rich elected to administer a sleeping aid using it.

In a blink, the starry sky and natural sounds dissipated. It all became white noise.

Then it was dreamless sleep, for the rest of his life. ❖

END TRANSMISSION