

Corner Bar Magazine

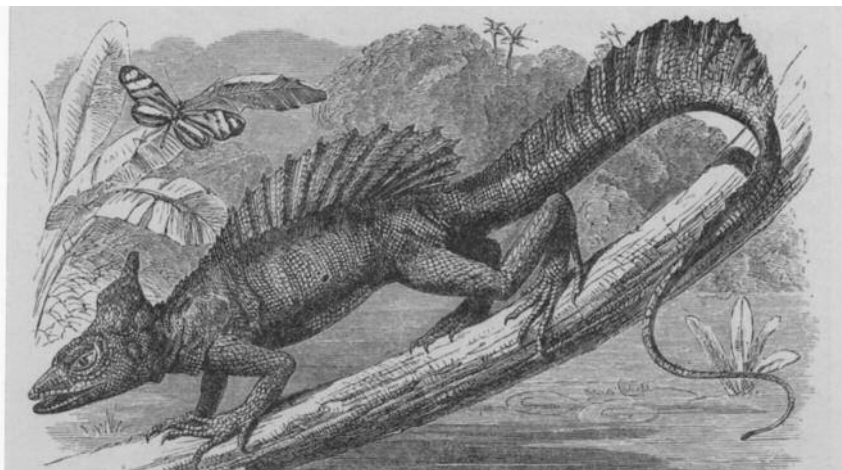
Volume 7 Number 2

Page 1 – TEAM by Daniel M. Cojocaru. Mr. Cojocaru was born and grew up in Switzerland (of Rumanian and Czech background). He studied English Lit in Zurich and later completed his PhD at Oxford University (St. Peter's College). But, since everybody's a critic, he decided to start writing fiction himself, whenever his kids let him. He teaches English in Switzerland. Recently he took a (yet) small step for mankind but a big one for himself and created his own website: www.danielmcojocaru.com

Page 8 – THE MAGICAL, MYSTICAL ESPIN by Jonathan. Jonathan is a Flash Fiction Writer from Solihull, UK. He has had pieces published in the Secret Attic Anthologies, the Bombfire Literacy Magazine and on the Friday Flash Fiction website. Jonathan enjoys writing Fantasy, Romance and Funny Fiction that stretches the imagination. Jonathan is a Public Librarian.

Page 11 – THE RIPLEY JUNCTION MONSTERS by Edward N. McConnell. Mr McConnell is a happily retired trial lawyer, a former adjunct professor of trial advocacy and a former State Archivist of Iowa. He started writing flash fiction and short stories in 2020. He enjoys a good story with a twist and tries to write one every once in a while. His flash fiction and short stories have appeared in *Literally Stories*, *Terror House Magazine*, *Refugeonlinejournal.org*, *MasticadoresIndia*, *Mad Swirl*, *Down in the Dirt*, *Rural Fiction Magazine*, and soon in *Drunk Monkeys*. He lives in West Des Moines, Iowa with his wife.

Page 19 – DARWIN by David Rich. Mr. Rich writes, "I live in the Boston area with my wife and two daughters. My speculative short fiction has appeared in various literary journals, including *Bards & Sages Quarterly*, *After Dinner Conversation*, *Bewildering Stories*, *The Macabre Museum*, and *Youth Imagination*."



“TEAM”

by DANIEL M. COJOCARU

“For what man knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of man which is in him?” (1 Corinthians 2:11)

#

“So, correct me if I’m wrong. But what you’re saying is that the time enhancing assisting mechanism can recreate all of history through the minding interaction of just two minds?” one of the more interested visitors of the guided tour asked.

“Well, not exactly”, the tour guide, a post-doc researcher of the institute, who was too professional to show his annoyance at such a basic question, explained patiently, “no more than two minds are involved *at the same time*. But, the deeper you go in the minding process and the further back you go in history, millions of minds are mined. And yes, potentially, and that is the ultimate goal of minding, as we call the mining of minds, we will create a perfect archive of human history if we can obtain enough funding for lateral on-site correlation objectivization.” “The lateral...what now?” the visitor, who seemed to have lost some of his interest, murmured in response. But the tour guide’s attention had been captured by the tinted glass doors that the group was approaching. As they stopped in front of the doors the guide said excitedly: “If we’re lucky, there is an active minding process

ongoing right now and we might just quickly sneak a peek.”

As the guide opened the door, everybody held their breath in anticipation and tried to get a good look at the insides of the circular room, which resembled an operating theatre. Two gurneys were revealed to be standing in the middle of the room. Strapped onto each was a seemingly lifeless adult body, one male, one female, covered from toe to neck with white sheets. Various tubes and IVs were exiting the bodies, leading to drip poles and diverse medical monitoring equipment, which was being constantly checked by four fully scrubbed technicians and which emitted monotonous beeps in a rhythmic sequence. “We are indeed lucky”, whispered the guide excitedly. “You see, the body on the left is one of our most capable Augurs. Yes”, he went on, perceiving the impressed looks on the faces of the visitors, “one of those rare people who have the gift of sifting through the masses of data that the TEAM mines. The other is actually not a dummy, but also a real human being. By accessing her memories we’re hoping to be able to recreate a dummy of her father.”

#

I close my eyes and enter the neural data stream. It feels like I’m in a fast-flowing river.

Then, as I'm propelled over the waterfall, I'm free-falling. My stomach churns, I ready myself for impact. But there is no end to the drop. Instead, my being is flattened and reshaped in the blink of an eye and I find myself sitting in the foyer of a funeral parlour. I face a green door with an oval-shaped window covering most of the door. Through it I can see a mostly empty car park. But before I can investigate my surroundings further, I'm flooded by a multitude of feelings, but mainly grief, and then shame. But that's what the training was for. I'm prepared for this. Only the shame is my own. Approaching footsteps interrupt my thoughts. I look up. A kind-looking, old man addresses me warmly in a thick Texan accent:

"Ma'am, your father is ready for you now."

#

"But how do you then proceed further back in history from there?" the interested visitor asked.

"I'm glad you asked", the guide said with a sudden glow in his eyes. "In a sense it's like standing between two mirrors. You can see an endless row of selves in the mirrors. But you know how you cannot really see to the end of the line because your mirror image is blocking your line of sight? In this analogy, your reflection in the mirror represents the collected memories of someone you knew well, say your grandmother. The reflection of the reflection could be, for example, your grandmother's memories of her grandmother. And with Auguration," the guide paused triumphantly, "we can get into the mirror by minding your memories of her and by creating a dummy of her and

thus extend our line of sight. We can then enter the mind of your grandmother directly. And minding her dummy, we can find her grandmother, create a dummy as soon as the TEAM has enough information on her etc., until we theoretically reach the birth of consciousness—or even life itself."

#

I feel like I'm in a river again. But this time it's shallow enough that I can stand. I face the current and effortlessly sift through the stream of approaching flotsam and occasionally I grab a piece and throw it for safe keeping onto the riverbank.

Good, the TEAM has started to piece together the flotsam, I can start navigating. I realize that the funeral parlour is too late. I rewind, the sifting now happening unconsciously; it's just like getting used to a new background noise that you don't notice anymore after a while. Now I'm a child, a girl on a swing being pushed by her dad – oh daddy, how I miss you! I let the memory float past me and force myself to focus on the mission. I turn around on the swing, smile at daddy and yell, "higher, daddy, higher," while new flotsam rushes past me in the river and my subconscious is maddeningly throwing new pieces onto the banks.

#

"But the dummy would not really be my grandmother," the interested visitor asked somewhat irritated and added hesitantly, "or hers?"

"Yes, but you see, there's a principle in physics positing that information is indestructible. Oh, but from the monitors I gather that the objectivization has already

started. We should expect the first data to arrive soon—look, there it is!” He pointed at a curved screen mounted to the wall at the far end of the room, on which slow-motion footage of what looked like a high-def version of the Zapruder film was to be seen. “Luuuucky indeed,” the guide hissed, barely able to contain his excitement, “we’ve just stumbled into our Sistine Chapel.”

“Would you mind moving aside please?” Two scrubbed technicians pushing yet another gurney, impatiently tried to pass the group of visitors, who, instead of getting out of the way, were eagerly trying to catch a glimpse of the blanket-covered body being pushed on the gurney. The guide, shocked out of his trance into action by the approaching technicians, drove his flock nervously to the side. Once the technicians had disappeared into the room with their gurney, he explained to his audience: “The body they just wheeled in, that was a dummy. In this, one of our most prestigious cases, we’re trying to mine the mind of one of the police officers riding right behind Kennedy’s open limousine. The TEAM is so finely tuned that it can detect information on the quantum level of someone’s neural networks. It’s kind of like zooming into a level of information that even the subjects themselves didn’t know existed. But it takes the talents of a human Augur to create meaning from this flood of information, to isolate the tears in the rain so to speak, and to subconsciously create the holographic image of the mind that the TEAM then can use to create the dummy.”

#

I’m riding on Main Street, looking for her in the thick crowd. But she’s not one to let herself be washed to the front of the crowd. *Irrelevant. I let that float past me.* I turn right on Houston Street. I feel the steady hum of my Duo-Glide FLH Solo underneath, as I slow down to turn left onto Elm Street. Then, out of nothing, the sound of a firecracker. President leaning over. Second crack blooms into a fountain of blooded matter and spatters uniform. No choice. Ride through it. *Like spraying fragrance into the air and stepping into the mist.* The smell of fresh vomit steaming in the heat. Park FLH Solo. Shouts and screams. Start looking for shooter. *Amount of Flotsam increasing rapidly.* Adrenaline rushing. Blood pumping. *Collecting and tossing.* People lying on their stomachs. No one looking like a shooter. A man with an umbrella. *Tagging for follow-up Auguration.* Open window over at book depository. Run over, start questioning people. *Collecting and tossing.* *Interference. Severing connection. Resurfacing. I open my eyes and lift my head. Bloody tourists at the door.*

#

“The dummy, while being a copy of a formerly existing person, actually *becomes* that person. Technically, we are not raising the dead so much as we are *recreating* them from the information they left behind. I know it sounds esoteric but it’s really just a scienti-...”

“Goddammit, Reeves,” the male body on the gurney, suddenly coming to life, shouted angrily at the tour guide, “I told you I do not want those rubbernecking

idiots anywhere near here.”

“I, I’m so sorry Kluge,” Reeves stammered, “but, you know that the director explicitly said that she wants visitors to experience Auguration first-hand.”

“I don’t care what the director says,” Kluge snapped back, untying his restraints and unhooking the various drips and monitoring equipment, “I want those gawkers outta here. This ain’t a circus.”

Reeves blushed deeply and he seemed frozen to the spot out of sheer embarrassment at the deep humiliation of this open, schoolmasterly reprimand. His flock had cast their eyes onto the floor as if in solidarity, but, occasionally peeked up, revealing their hidden excitement at this piece of real-life melodrama.

It was only when Kluge menacingly stepped down from the gurney, his long, curly brown hair adorning his muscular upper body—Conan the Barbarian reborn as Sistine Adam—that Reeves snapped into flight mode and clumsily ushered his group out, murmuring apologetically something about it not being his fault what with emotional instability being a side effect of Auguration. As the visitors left, the dummy was wheeled into the centre of the room.

“It amazes me how Reeves falls for that macho act, every single time. Sort of reminds me of one of those nineties b-movie stars. Lorenzo something or other. Lalas?” one of the technicians said behind his mask with a chuckle but then continued in a more serious tone: “Kluge, you wanna be there for the holo-indexing?”

“No Chris, sorry, not today. I need a

break after this. But you don’t need me for this. Everything should be tagged properly – I mean up to the point when that idiot...,” Kluge took a deep breath and steadied himself, “anyway. I don’t think the ‘ass’ should have a problem objectivizing.”

“Kluge,” Chris interrupted in mock-reprimand with probably half a smirk behind his mask, “you know the director doesn’t like it when you call it that.”

“Alright, the ‘TEAM’, whatever,” Kluge sighed, “but it seems like I’m in trouble with the director no matter what. So *that* won’t make much of a difference. Anyway, you should also have enough memories stored after this for creating the dummy. Call me if you need any help with that.”

“Yeah, thought so too. That’s why I ordered the body from supplies. We should have it ready for you by tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow? That would be awesome. We might even collect enough flotsam to make umbrella guy our next dummy in all this, you know, if I can collect from closer up, through the eyes of motorcycle guy, without any bubbly interference from his daughter. Her grief was overwhelming. Really struggled to keep it down.” Kluge looked down at the other gurney beside his with a sudden look of compassion mixed with surprise at the feeling: “Just make sure you wheel her out before she wakes up. Might be messy if she sees the dummy of her dad next to her.”

“Now I’m insulted, Kluge,” Chris answered mockingly, “you should rather worry about the director.”

“Yeah, yeah, I’ll talk to her. See ya man. Guys.” Kluge put on his gown and shuffled towards a side door next to the screen, tipping an invisible hat at his scrubbed colleagues, who except for Chris, had already turned their attention back to their monitors.

#

The crowd is clapping and chanting something. I’m in the midst of it and look up at the balcony of the huge building demarcating the crowd. An old man in a dark coat and a brown astrakhan *smurf* hat stands behind a lectern addressing the crowd. “...Doresc, de asemenea, s’adresez mul umiri ini iatorilor...” *Come on, come on, how long can it take for the stupid translation device to come online. Other dark smurfs are standing on each side of him, filling the huge balcony. Papa Smurf – need to stop tagging them as smurfs, director will relegate me to an even more boring backwater than Eastern European history if I don’t – drones on. “... i organizatorilor acestei mare manifest ri populare in Bucarest... considering it” Finally! „as a...” Something’s wrong. A low humming sound increasing in intensity. Feedback loop from translation device? Can’t be. Headsmurf seems to hear it too, as he has stopped talking and casts an uncertain gaze over the crowd below. I force my mind back into the dummy’s. Ceau escu raises his hand as if trying to use the Force to stop the humming. It turns into a screeching howl. It’s the crowd! I shudder as the transmission is severed abruptly and I am forced out of the miner’s dummy’s mind and enter my own with a violent jolt.*

#

“What the fuck, Chris!” Kluge shouted, bolting upright from his gurney despite all the straps and wires.

“I’m sorry, man,” Chris stammered apologetically, “but I had no choice.” He awkwardly nodded towards his right as if trying to bring something to Kluge’s attention without anyone else noticing.

“No need to apologize Mr. Reznik. Especially not to Mr. Kluge,” a sharp voice, belonging to the person standing on Chris’ right, bellowed.

“Director Chang. Why, ... what are you doing here?” Kluge’s anger had given way to surprise mixed with a sudden anxiety about what was to come.

“*Smurf?* Seriously?” the woman Kluge addressed as Chang continued. “Using *the Force?! Do you even realize the seriousness of what it is we’re doing here? This is not a circus!*”

“My words exactly,” mumbled Kluge sullenly.

“Excuse me?” the part of the director’s face left visible by her mask turned even a shade darker at this interruption “Can you imagine what damage this could do to the reputation of the institute if this gets out? We could lose billions in public and private funding. Not to mention the visitors to our theme parks. You know how fickle public opinion can be. I really should fire your sorry ass for this!”

“Well, why don’t you then?” Kluge retorted stubbornly.

Chang took a deep breath and was about to say something but then just

released the air with an angry puff into her mask and rolled her eyes.

“Oh, I see, you *can't* fire me,” said Kluge almost triumphantly, realizing that Chang had lost some of her momentum. “You need me. No matter how much you hate me, you won't be able to find an Augur even half as talented as I, who's able to separate the wheat from the chaff for the 'ass'.”

“Don't call it that. Its name is the TEAM.” Chang hissed furiously. But her tone had subtly assumed a tinge of resigned frustration. “And don't be so sure that I won't fire you anyway if you keep pushing it. Even the highest level of tagging is not worth *this!*”

But Kluge had sniffed out Chang's underlying fear and attacked it like a feral dog. “Oh yeah? And say you actually have the guts to do it. Don't you think I know what you're doing with those used dummies?”

“Kluge, not in front of...” Chang looked at Chris and the other technicians, who were busily checking their screens.

“You think *they* don't know?” Kluge snorted. “*Everybody* here knows about your little collection of dummies. Did you really think you could keep that a secret? A basement full of dummies that should have been burnt years ago?”

Chang raised her hand as if to shush Kluge, but he was on a roll.

“Yeah, why don't you show *that* to your little groups of visitors. Oh, I'm so gonna blow the whistle on you. How many little Barbie Adolfs have you collected by now,

six, seven?”

“It's nothing like that,” Chang managed to finally throw in. “You know how everybody always keeps coming back to World War II and continuously wants to check whether things really happened the way they did. Better—and actually cheaper—to have a few Führers at the ready rather than mind them from scratch. Same goes actually for your little pet project.”

“Pet pro...?” Kluge made a visible effort of restraining himself, “even that little weasel Reeves refers to it as the Sistine Chapel!”

“That's not a very good analogy though, is it?” Chang was slowly regaining some of her lost composure. “We're not doing art but reproducing *objective* history, which is exactly why you should stop contaminating the process with your subjective asides. And what's your fascination with old white males anyway? I assign you to Eastern European history and you choose Ceau escu?”

“You were the one defending him just a minute ago. And Kennedy wasn't old.”

“Yeah, well he would have been if, you know....”

“Do you really wanna make this about patriarchy now? You wouldn't even have this job if you weren't a woman and half Chinese.”

Kluge realized his mistake as soon as the words were out of his mouth, but it was too late.

“Oh, so if this *isn't* about patriarchy,” Chang's eyes hinted at her smirk behind her mask, and, knowing that she had won,

she continued “then you surely wouldn’t mind being reassigned to a more *matriarchal* project?”

“You don’t mean?”

“Yes, I *do* mean.”

“Fuck.”

“Well, good chat Kluge. Guys.” Chang nodded towards Chris and the technicians and left the room without looking back.

A heavy silence hung in the room, pierced only by the occasional beeping monitor. From the hallway the soothing voice-over of one of the promotional screens started to gradually wash away the aural vacuum: “...for your visit at the TEAM Institute of Modern Auguration. We hope you are enjoying your journey to the past of humankind. A past that has come to life for all and can safely be experienced by young and old. How would you like to continue on your journey of knowledge? Please choose one for ‘a short history of TEAMI-MA,’ two for ‘overview of historical theme parks’, three...”

#

Tall grass. Sitting on a plain. Sun burning. Stifling humidity. *How did they even get this far back? It must have taken tens of thousands of dummies to reach the mind of my host. The translation device is offline, as my dummy has not really developed spoken language yet. Need to navigate intuitively, catch onto impressions, raw emotions. No longer clear where I end and she begins. The letters are mine, the feelings hers. Extinction. For me. Not my sister. A touch on my shoulder. I look around at her huge, fertile belly. She is due soon. Our next dummy. I busily collect flotsam for the*

TEAM. It really might be her. She bows down and grunts something soothing into my ear. It will be my time soon? But it won't. That's when I—I—know it's her. The confidence. The certainty. The vision. Mitochondrial Eve turns around and walks away. An overwhelming feeling of futility and sadness washes over me. The feeling spills over into me. The hubris of Auguration. Like juggling sand. There's no TEAM in I. I look up at the horizon. A human shape approaching from afar. Holding a... stick? The shape is fiddling with the stick. Turns into a bow. An... umbrella? Wait...what's umbrella guy doing here? How is this even possible? Her sadness turns into anger and becomes mine. I look at the big rock that I've been holding all this time. Could I change history? Could I nip humanity in the bud? Retro-cause its extinction? No, wait, I'm not really travelling in time. But it could kill TEAM, couldn't it? Overload its circuits with my imaginary history. It's worth a shot. Wait, why the destructive urges? But why is irrelevant. The Anger becomes unbearable. I get up slowly, with fear and trembling, turn around and hobble towards my unsuspecting sister. She starts to turn at the sound of my approaching footsteps and instinctively lifts her hands to protect herself. But it's too late. My hand is lifted high in the air, the tip of my index finger touching the sky—a tableau vivant for a fresco painting—and then my hand quickly and forcefully comes down—our purposes united in flooding release. Didn't see that one coming, did ya, Chang? ❖

“THE MAGICAL, MYSTICAL ESPIN”

by JONATHAN

The Palace

In the Palace, home of the Royal Dynasty, Prince Vladimir stared out of his bedroom window across the snowy expanse. Still only a child, not even ten, Vladimir liked to question life. Perched on his windowsill, Vladimir imagined Elves, Orcs, Demons and even Witches lurked in the vast forest on the horizon that no one visited. Vladimir liked to believe his Grandma’s fairy tales were true because palace life was too dull. Taking an old spinning top from his drawer, Vladimir

spun it on the windowsill and watched time elapse effortlessly.

The Lonesome Man

The red sky of dawn was a stark backdrop to the dark, undisturbed forest ahead. The snow surrounding it enveloped the landscape. Eerily there was just one elderly, lonesome man struggling to walk across these snow plains. The only penetration into the blanket of white was his blood-stained footprints. Dazed and weary, the lonesome man summoned just enough energy to take



another step towards the forest. He sensed he had a purpose and kept repeating the words, "*Espin is reborn.*"

The Crow

Perched upon a conifer branch swaying in the wind, a crow flew down, surveying the rocks beneath for food. Pecking at gaps, the starving crow longed for some sustenance. Vast frosts night after night made finding nourishment a desperate plead. Another night in this precarious state could be the crow's last. Summoning another bit of energy, the crow flew to the next rock in hope rather than expectation. Hearing "*Espin is reborn,*" being chanted nearby, lifted the crow's spirits.

The Palace

Grandma had always warned Vladimir not to use this spinning top, but this only fuelled Vladimir's intrigue more. Starring in awe at it, excitement ran through him, but as it fell off the windowsill, Vladimir panicked. Snatching it just before it hit the floor, he felt like he had saved a life. Engrossed, Vladimir spun it again and felt a sense of peace run through his veins.

The Hermit

Maria lived alone in a ramshackle log cabin deep in the forest with just crows for company. Rumours had spread that she was a witch, so folk kept away from not just her, but the whole forest. Lonely, Maria dreamed every day of having a visitor and cooked her favourite cabbage soup, delicately laying her table for two. Today she sensed someone was

near.

The Palace

Putting the spinning top away, Vladimir sat at the end of his bed and read his favourite book of fairy tales. The story was about Prince Espin, who lived hundreds of years ago. Prince Espin had inherited Queen Maria's magical powers and performed many great miracles. However, feeling threatened, the King hastily got the guards to murder his son in a moment of madness. Fleeing into the forest, the Queen placed a curse on the King and within days he died of a terrible fever.

Settling in a log cabin, she vowed never to leave the forest again until Espin returned. Maria aged barely a year every hundred years, but time and loneliness meant that she forgot she was the Queen it was believed. Meanwhile, Espin's powers lived on with many miracles attributed to his magic across the centuries.

Lying in bed, Vladimir wished he had Prince Espin's powers? Unable to sleep, Vladimir spun the spinning top around all night transfixed in awe. As the sun rose, Vladimir heard a tap on the window and saw a crow, which he fed some bread crumbs. However, glancing back towards his mirror, he didn't see his reflection, but a crow's instead.

"*I have become you,*" the child on the bed beamed, who had been Vladimir. "*I have been reborn thanks to my spinning top. You are joining the other crows in the forest now.*"

Possessed, Vladimir lost control of himself

and flew, terrified with twelve other crows into the depths of the forest. Landing on the steps of a ramshackle cabin, an old lady with long, scruffy, white hair approached him with a wry smile on her face. *“Espin is back again because of you boy. You will forever be a crow here now. Each of these crows was someone at the palace just like you.”*

Maria then chirped, *“my crows, I tempted a lonesome man to my cabin. His sacrifice, along with the magic spinning top, has meant that Espin has been reborn. You have a feast.”*

Squirming, Vladimir saw a dead, old man’s body lying in the snow. Without hesitating, the crows ripped into it savagery.

“Go for it boy, no other food is anywhere in this forest,” Maria cackled.

Feeling sick and dizzy, Vladimir’s vision blurred. Waking up in hot sweats back at the palace in bed, Grandma shook her head looking over him.

“What did I tell you,” she exclaimed. *“I knew that boy was not you. I chucked the spinning top straight in the fire. Espin is now destroyed. The forest is safe and full of life once again.”*

“My storybooks said Espin was good,” Vladimir cried.

“A fairy tale is not fact,” Grandma alluded. *“Now admire what is outside.”*

Smiling, expectantly, Vladimir glanced out at the forest, but it still looked lifeless.

“It just looks the same,” Vladimir murmured.

“Indeed boy”, Grandma sneered. *“I knew*

placing that spinning top would lure you. Your real Grandma became a crow, many moons ago.”

Blinking, Vladimir realised that he was still at the ramshackle cabin. It was just a vision he had seen. The old lady lay dead by him.

Vladimir heard trumpet calls from the castle. Following the other crows towards it, he saw what had been himself and his Grandma on the balcony addressing a jubilant crowd.

“Maria and I are back,” Espin roared, as he turned the sun darker than night. *“Welcome back everyone from my court. It’s a crow pie feast for us all tonight,”* he gloated, ecstatically. ❖

“THE RIPLEY JUNCTION MONSTERS”

by EDWARD N. McCONNELL

Treadway Electronics in Ripley Junction, Iowa, sells, installs and repairs all sorts of electronic equipment. I'm Eddie Treadway, the owner. Since I was a kid I loved tinkering with electronic devices. So does my closest friend and half-brother, Sam Parkins, the local general store owner. I do the electronics; Sam is good at mechanical details. We were always working on “little projects”.

A few years back I married a woman named, Helen. Her family was rich, I mean, really wealthy. Upon our marriage, her parents gave her three million dollars. It was her money that allowed me to open and operate the electronics store. At my urging she also loaned some money to Sam so he could keep his general store going.

Helen and I weren't married very long before we hit a rough patch. She fell in with a bad crowd and started using LSD and other drugs. She became distant, secretive and combative. I suspected she covered up her drug habit before the wedding. Since she controlled our money, I wanted her to get help but was afraid she would cut me off if I pressed her too hard. If she pulled her financial support, both Sam and I stood to lose our businesses. Sam and I talked about this often.

As my marriage deteriorated, Helen

decided to run off to California with two drug dealers. As she was leaving town, she died under mysterious circumstances. Her partially naked body was found in a shallow creek outside Ripley Junction. Law enforcement determined the culprits were the drug dealers and a search commenced. My wife's killers were never apprehended.

Parkins' General Store is a gathering place for townsfolk and tourists who want to hear stories about the area. He's loves the local folklore, part of which, is the Ripley Junction Monsters. He's the best at telling their history, occasional reappearances and how they figured in my wife's murder. I've probably heard this story a hundred times. I never tire of it.

Sam is a tall, strong fellow with a hearty laugh. Folks around here say he could talk the paint off a barn door. His customers come to the store for the free coffee and to hear the yarns he spins. I'll give him credit; he's very entertaining.

Today, in need of a jolt of caffeine, I moseyed into the store. Around the potbelly, some tourists are waiting to hear Sam tell the story of the Ripley Junction Monsters. I see he's getting ready to tell it now. When he takes a break, I'll tell you some things people don't know about these “monsters.” For now, let's listen to Sam.

#

“Folks, today I want to tell you about the history of the Ripley Junction Monsters.

I’ve lived all my life in Ripley Junction. I know the people of this area, they believe deeply in what they think is true. One of those things is the existence of these monsters.

Ripley Junction is a small hamlet now but, at the turn of the twentieth century, it was a prosperous coal mining town. Rich seams of bituminous coal run all through the substrata of this area. At that time, the Calder Mining Company had three large deep mining operations around Ripley Junction. Many of its residents worked in the mines. Back then, every building and industrial facility in the state burned coal for heat and power. A lot of that coal came from the Calder Mines.

The Ripley Junction Monsters, as they came to be known, were first spotted in the summer of 1907. People at the Annual Town Fair reported seeing two “big birds” circling the square. When the “birds” swooped down at a group of children, the frightened people scrambled for safety. The Town Constable couldn’t fire his weapon at these intruders for fear of hitting someone. The creatures did not come close to any people, but their outlines were fully visible in the sky. They were soon gone.

After this sighting, four separate incidents occurred the following week where these strange creatures swooped down, shining lights and making screeching noises as they passed over people who were out and about after dark. In each instance, no one

was hurt, just scared. The witnesses said the creatures flew off in the direction of the mines.

As a result of these sightings, the Constable called a town meeting, formed a posse and was about to set off for the mines when the monsters dropped out of the sky, swooping down Main Street and landing on the hardware store. The posse got a good look at these animals. Each was the size of a man but with wings, large claws and a light shining from what looked like a horn on their heads. The posse reacted by shooting. You’re sitting in what used to be the hardware store. When you go outside, you’ll find some of the bullet holes in the siding of this building. While each shooter was certain he had hit the creatures, neither of the winged flyers seemed affected.

The posse then chased after the creatures as they flew in the direction of the coal mines. When they arrived at the opening of the Calder Mine #1, the creatures stood, waiting, as if to make a final stand. When more gunfire erupted, the creatures disappeared into the mine.

The Constable, leading the posse into the entrance tunnel, held his lamp up and saw both creatures drop down the main elevator shaft. He decided to take the posse no further. As a precaution, he had some of the men maintain a presence at the mine for a week. After that time, it was assumed the creatures had died when they *fell* down the elevator shaft.

No further sightings were made again until 1926, after the mines closed. The monsters came back, flew around town,

were spotted, and then disappeared again. It was reported, they were last seen flying in the direction of the mine. Warnings were issued not to go into the mine for fear of provoking whatever might be in there. When the mines closed, a gate had been put across the openings but the creatures kept reappearing.

The monsters reappeared in 1943, 1967 and 1975. Again, there were sightings, scaring the local residents, but no one was hurt. The old stories of creatures from the now abandoned mines were revived.

Nowadays, teachers in the schools make the story of the Ripley Junction Monsters part of local history lessons. From time to time a book gets written about this phenomenon; even a TV show was produced about the 1907 sighting. To outsiders, for the townsfolk to believe in the existence of these 'monsters' may seem unreasonable; silly actually. For the locals, they are as real as you and me."

I had to chuckle a little. Sam really had everybody on the edge of their seats. Sensing the folks were into the story, he pressed on.

"The most recent sighting of these monsters began one night, a few years back, outside Kenny Crawford's auto repair shop, located over by the junk yard. Kenny lived in the apartment above the shop. That night he heard strange noises that woke him from a deep sleep. Rose Temple was there also but she didn't want her husband to know that. The sounds roused her, too.

Kenny grabbed his shotgun and crept down the backstairs hoping to scare away

any prowlers. He was always afraid that Duane Temple, Rose's husband, would figure out she was a regular night visitor to the repair shop. He went outside hoping it wasn't Duane.

As he pushed the backdoor open, it creaked. He heard a rustling sound, like wings flapping, but Kenny couldn't place it. Then, he figured it out; it was right above him coming from the peak of the roof.

He stepped away from the building to get a better look. Against the back light of a full moon, he saw it. Well, he saw "them" but he wasn't altogether sure what "them" was. What he was sure of though, it wasn't Duane. He saw the outline of two figures. Each was the size of a man but with wings, large claws and a light shining from what looked like a horn on their heads. They were huddled together.

'You get outta here,' Kenny yelled.

The words were hardly out of his mouth when he found himself standing in a blinding light. Frightened, he pointed his shotgun up to the peak of the roof and squeezed off a round. He was sure that he hit one, but there appeared to be no effect. All he saw were the two winged creatures dropping down towards him. The light, which seemed to come from their horns, became brighter the closer they got. The creatures were screeching.

Instinctively, he moved backward. As he did, he tripped over a crankshaft laying on the ground among the auto parts scattered in the lot. He fell backwards and lost his hold on his shotgun. The creatures, now in flight, swooped over him. As they passed,

the intense light and noise washed over him, and then faded as the beasts disappeared into the blackness of the night. Other than a few scrapes from the fall, Kenny wasn't hurt.

Once he regained his wits, he realized that having fired his shotgun, the Constable would soon come. The Constable was Duane Temple. Kenny had to get Rose dressed and out of the apartment right now. As he hustled her out the back, Kenny heard the knock on his front door and hurried to open it. It was Duane.

'Kenny, what's going on here? Did you discharge a weapon?'

'Yes sir, I did. I took a shot at two winged creatures making a racket on my roof. I thought they were prowlers. Duane, I've never seen the like of this. It must have been those things people round these parts have been seeing from time to time. You know, those monsters.'

Kenny couldn't get his words out fast enough. 'These two things were big as men but had wings. At first, they seemed to be wearing a light, you know, like you see on miners' helmets. Then I saw the light was coming from a horn or something growing out of their heads. I yelled at them. They shined a bright light on me. I fired a shot, but I must have missed. Then they swooped down at me making a terrible sound. Moving backward, I tripped and fell, lost my shotgun. They flew off.'

'Have you been at The Inn again?' Duane asked. The Inn on Main Street was the busiest bar in town.

'Yeah, I had a couple of beers, tonight,'

Kenny said.

'Couple of beers, huh? Go back in and sleep it off and don't shoot at anything again. You have any more trouble, call me. Understand? Next time, I'm running you in.'

Kenny went back to bed feeling lucky he was still alive and Duane was none the wiser about Rose.

#

Kenny wasn't the only one who saw these beasts. Over the course of the next two nights, the local banker, Bill Clemons and the town sawbones, Doc Ogilvie, each, saw the same two manlike, winged creatures with lights on their heads.

Bill Clemons was the first. He came home from the bank after dark and noticed two winged forms on his porch roof. Normally, he would pay no attention to birds, even large ones, but these figures were shining lights in his daughter's bedroom window. Clemons ran into the house, grabbed his shotgun and bounded up the stairs. He threw open the door to his daughter's room and was hit with a bright light shining in his eyes. He was about to blast the shapes outside the window when the light started to fade into the distance. He stepped to the window and saw two dark, manlike things with wings flying away. Other than his daughter being frightened and him being out of breath, no one was hurt.

The next night, Doc Ogilvie was smoking his pipe on his front porch trying to relax from a busy day at the hospital. He heard scratching noises coming from the

end of his porch. When he looked up he thought he saw two men shining bright lights in his direction. He called out asking who they were. When he got up to get a closer look, the lights dimmed and he heard the sounds of wings flapping, the sound and lights getting fainter as they moved away from the house. When he turned on the porch light he found scratch marks on the railing.

Each time, Duane Temple was called and investigated. There was no physical evidence at Bill Clemons, but at Doc Ogilvie's he saw the scratch marks. His concern grew. Kenny's tale was one thing, but Bill and Doc were solid citizens. They were telling the same story about manlike, winged creatures flying around, shining lights and scaring people. Since they each had these encounters separately and they hadn't talked to one another, there had to be something to this.

So far, the whole town had been lucky. There had only been one shot fired, at whatever these things were. Duane decided it was time to head off any further nighttime gun play. He called a public meeting for the next evening. There, Duane tried to get control of the situation.

At the meeting he told the crowd, 'I don't want any more of you night owls freelancing and taking pot shots at these birds or whatever they are. They're probably turkey vultures. Stop it. You're gonna shoot somebody and then we'll have real trouble. Call me if you see something. I'll come right over and check things out. No more shooting within the town limits. Do you all

understand?'

Everyone present said, 'Yes'."

At this point in his story, Sam, being real good at gauging interest looked at the tourists; saw they were hanging on every word, so he continued.

"Everyone agreed they would follow Duane's instructions. At least, that was their intent, until the next night. In what became known as the 'Main Street Shootout', a fresh sighting of whatever these things were, caused all hell to break loose.

It all started when Doc Ogilvie was making a late night house call. A child had the croup or something. Because he had been called out late and previously had that run in with these creatures, he carried his revolver. As he headed down Main Street, he saw two bright lights on top of the Bank. It was like the Bank had installed spotlights which moved back and forth as they shined down on the street. Having seen these "lights" before and taking no chances, he drew his weapon. As he did the two murky winged forms on top of the Bank swooped down at him. As the light got closer, the unsettling sounds grew louder. Doc took aim and fired.

Now, Doc Ogilvie is a good doctor but a really bad shot. Bill Clemons had been working late at the Bank. He was getting ready to leave when Doc Ogilvie's errant shots shattered the front window. Looking out and seeing the two winged creatures on the street, Bill grabbed his Colt .45 revolver, ran out the door, saw the "lights" and started shooting in that direction.

At The Inn, Kenny Crawford was holding court with a number of fairly drunk patrons.

“I’m telling you, when I came out of my apartment and saw these two monsters on the roof, I didn’t hesitate, I blasted away with my shotgun. I’m sure I hit one but they are hard to kill.”

Kenny’s story was interrupted by the disturbance on Main Street. Most of the people listening to him were carrying a concealed weapon. Following the noises, they emptied out on to Main Street to see what was going on.

When Kenny saw those *lights* he yelled, “It’s those things I’ve been telling you about.” He pulled out his handgun and opened fire in the direction of the creatures. When Kenny shot, so did everyone else. The crowd pumped lead into the lighted place where the winged creatures stood. Either nobody hit their intended targets or none of the shots had any effect. In front of everyone, the creatures flew away.

By some miracle, neither Bill Clemons nor Doc Ogilvie was hit by any the bullets but two manikins at the Millinery Shop suffered fatal wounds. The three ladies’ hats in the window, next to the manikins, escaped with minor injuries. None of the crowd out on the street was hurt.

When Duane showed up the commotion was over, but he heard more stories and got more questions about flying winged men with lights than he wanted to hear or could answer. The most important thing to come out of this confrontation was a lot of folks got a look at these creatures or

thought they did. No one was sure of what they saw but everyone was scared and on edge.

As Duane went back to the police station he thought how lucky it was that, so far, no one was hurt. In fact, while these creatures were strange, the more dangerous animals were the townsfolk. But he wondered, now that those things had been attacked, if they might become violent.”

Sam was about to continue his story but before he could, some customers needed help so he stopped to get them through the checkout line. Now that he’s paused for a moment, I promised I’d tell you some things people don’t know about these “monsters”. I’m only going to tell this once, so pay attention.

#

If I was finishing Sam’s *public version* to the people in the store, this is what it would be.

“When Helen packed up to leave it was at the same time all this “monster” business was going on. You know, I can still hear Helen’s voice saying, ‘I’m going to California. I can’t stay in this backwater any longer. You’re boring. I want to have a life. I found two fun guys to take me outta here and away from you. I’m taking my money and cutting you and your brother off.’”

When she walked out, I called Sam and told him what she said.

“Get over here, she’s already left.”

“I’m on my way, bro, everything will be alright,” he said.

When I hung up the phone, Helen was already walking on her way to Ripley

Junction carrying her suitcase. I assumed the two guys she mentioned were going to pick her up. When Sam arrived; we jumped into his truck and went after her.

As we caught up to where she should have been, it was getting dark but still light enough to see. A few minutes later, I spotted my poor wife's lifeless body, scratched, beaten, clothes torn and partially naked, lying in the shallow waters of the creek.

"Stay here," Sam said. "I'll get help." I went down and sat on the rocks next to her. After a time, Sam brought back Duane. When he saw her body, he let out a sigh.

For what seemed like the longest time, he looked over the whole area without uttering a word. Then he said, "What did you two see, exactly?"

I was too upset to speak so Sam answered.

"As God is my witness, Duane, we saw two manlike things with wings standing over her body. We yelled as we approached and they went up the rocks on the other side of the creek bank and flew off with the suit case of all things. I know it sounds nuts but that's what we saw."

Duane had a sick feeling. "I knew these things would turn violent. In all the sightings over the years, never had these things harmed anyone. With all the shooting by the townsfolk, they now had reason to," he said.

Normally, believing Sam's story would have been crazy. But between what Duane heard all his life about the local 'monsters' and had seen and heard in the last couple of days, what Sam was saying was plausible.

He also knew he couldn't tell the State Police it was two winged monsters that killed Helen; he would have been relieved of his duties. After what happened on Main Street, attributing this murder to winged monsters would cause a panic in the town. He now had to decide what to believe.

Then, without any prompting, Duane said, "So you saw two men running away from the scene with her suitcase, right?"

Sam and I each said, "Yes."

'Did you go after them?' he asked.

Having regained my composure, I said, "No. We stopped to see if we could help Helen. We couldn't, she was already dead. Then Sam left to get you."

I added the following, "Duane, Helen had been running with a couple drug dealers. When she left the house, she said she was going to California with them."

"Drug dealers, what do they look like? Did you ever see these guys?" Duane said.

"No. Helen talked about 'two fun guys.' All I know is she got her dope from them," I said.

Duane called the State Police. He told them what I said about the two drug dealers. They began a search began. After, Sam and I gave Duane and the State Police full statements. Sam took me to his house.

#

OK, that's the 'public version', but since I promised I'd tell you some things people don't know about these "monsters", here goes.

I remember my call to Sam after Helen left like it was twenty minutes ago.

"Get over here, she's already left." I was

scared we would lose everything.

I can still hear Sam say, “We knew this could happen once she started on the dope. She’s our ‘pot of gold’. We can’t let her walk out. That’s why we have been working on our ‘little project’. We’re ready for this. Don’t worry.”

Sam reminded me, “Eddie, for months now we have been testing out our equipment. You know the electronics and the mechanical functions all work fine. In the last few days, we’ve gotten the townsfolk all riled up about these ‘monsters.’ If something happens to her, well, it will either be the ‘monsters’ or the ‘drug dealers.’ Just stick with the story.”

You see, if Helen died with no heirs and no prenuptial agreement, as the grieving husband, I got it all; three million bucks. Even if she had made a will I didn’t know about, as her husband, by law, I got a one third share of her estate. Sam and I were covered either way.

As for our ‘little project’, the Ripley Junction Monsters were drone quadcopters. Sam came up with the monster effects. He fabricated wings out of colored feather printed plastic cloth. The claws, also made out of plastic, were attached to the wings. The horns were encased LED lights painted to look like horns. I recorded bird sounds and installed audio controls and tiny speakers to cover the drone noises with screeching.

After a lot of practice, I flew the drones over the town. By landing them on roofs, shining lights into windows and on the streets, I made sure as many people as possi-

ble saw them. Weapons fired at the monsters had no effect because the bullets just passed through the cloth. Anyway, knowing the townsfolk the way we do, we counted on them being lousy shots. They didn’t disappoint. It was unlikely they’d hit the small body of the drones even if they got a round or two pointed in the right direction.

The drug dealers, you ask, they never existed. I told that to the cops to get them chasing their tails. Before Sam went to get Duane, I grabbed the suitcase Helen was carrying and hid it in his truck. Nobody asked to check Sam’s truck. Later, we burned it.

What we didn’t count on was Duane’s unintended help. Although, he believed the monsters had come back, he couldn’t bring himself to say they killed Helen. On his own, he went with the ‘drug dealers’ story. It was a lucky break. The State Police were looking for two suspects that didn’t exist. After a while, the case went cold and they finally gave up.

I inherited Helen’s money; all of it. Sam and I share it. Occasionally, we squabble over who gets what, but we work it out and live a good life; after all, we’re brothers.

As for the Ripley Junction Monsters; they haven’t been seen since, that is, if you don’t consider Sam and me. ❖

“DARWIN”

by DAVID RICH

Owen brought the pill to his lips and glanced at the face in the bathroom mirror. He cursed the fact that twenty-second century medical science was yet unable to keep at bay the waves of hopelessness that too often washed over him. Then, he swallowed the pill.

Turning his head toward the window, he should have seen the bustling swimming pools, restaurants, and breweries that were the rage of California’s high-altitude desert. The latest trend, in fact, were “brew pools” where one could order a pair of tapas with a flight of local ales while floating on an inflated tube.

Instead, Owen saw only the hot, blowing sands of Cactus Wound City. He’d found his way there following the wave of other twentysomethings relocating from California’s beaches, which had been disappearing from erosion and rising sea levels.

The sun had barely set when he tucked himself in. His alarm would wake him at an ungodly early hour for his thankless job at a trendy fitness mega-facility.

Owen appreciated that his sleep aids, at least, were largely effective.

#

The next morning, three thousand miles eastward, Electromech CEO Peter Obermann fumed over the thirty-seventh-

floor view from Reyes’ laboratory. It sported all-glass walls revealing the New Hampshire mountains in the distance. He was outraged that the view was slightly better than from his own office. He’d have something to say later to the head of the building design committee.

A century earlier, the scenic town had been known primarily for weekend getaways. Now it was home to some of the world’s most technically advanced enterprises. That had been the trend as homes and businesses migrated to higher ground from flooding coastal hubs. Such had been the recent fate of Electromech’s headquarters and innovation center.

“Elle, he’s just a goddamned robot,” Obermann barked. “Yeah, he looks more human than our older models. But so the hell what?”

Obermann accepted that Dr. Elle Reyes was Electromech’s most gifted and prolific engineer. While the company sported over 75,000 employees worldwide, she was one of only seven, including Obermann, with secure full-time roles and paid benefits. She ran the Special Projects team, which had essentially free rein to invent. Hardly anyone ever questioned how Reyes spent the money.

While Obermann respected Reyes, they

had a political rivalry. The board of directors welcomed Reyes' advice, frustrating Obermann's desire to exercise power and control over the company. Conceding how difficult it was to steal her thunder, he was hopeful he'd caught her in a moment of foolishness.

Booting up Darwin, Dr. Reyes replied in her gravelly voice, "Pete, it's not how he looks; it's how he thinks."

"Hello Elle," Darwin said to Reyes when at full power. Then, turning to Obermann, the robot continued with crisply formed words, "I have not made your acquaintance. My name is—"

"I know who you are," Obermann interrupted.

Obermann rolled his eyes at Reyes as he shook Darwin's hand.

"He seems stiff, Elle," the CEO complained.

"You appear disappointed, sir," the robot responded. "I would like to address you casually by first name, but—"

"Peter, he thinks like a human being," Reyes said irritably. "He interprets body language and facial expressions."

"He doesn't seem very goddamn human to me," Obermann countered, taking delight in her frustration and hoping to fuel it further.

Darwin simply glanced back and forth as Obermann and Reyes bickered.

"That's because he lacks the foibles of human emotion!" Reyes exclaimed. "He understands human problems, Pete. But he's more logical than us. Give him your personal situations... and without any cogni-

tive biases, he'll always reveal your best course of action. How do I convince my boss to give me a raise? What should I study in college? How do I get someone to date me? People screw these things up! We can't see our own lives objectively! But Darwin understands the human mind intimately and provides optimum personal advice in any situation. He's the perfect friend."

"Are you done?" Obermann asked.

He didn't even want to begin explaining the flaws in her reasoning. No one wants good advice or unbiased analysis, he thought. People hear what they want to hear. Yes, they make bad decisions, but usually not because they don't know any better!

Obermann addressed the robot, "Darwin, do you understand what it means to be a living, self-aware human being?"

"The concept of self-awareness," Darwin replied, "is an illusion embedded in human neural patterns. Biomolecules in the human brain conspire to convince the human being that it has a unique property referred to as 'the self' or 'sentience.' This trait arose as a survival advantage in the evolutionary—"

"Elle, shut the goddamn philosophy professor down!" Obermann demanded.

Hesitating for a moment, Reyes complied. There was an uncomfortable silence until Darwin's shutdown was complete. Obermann could read the rage in Reyes' eyes.

He loved it.

He could hardly believe that someone smart enough to build a robot could have so little understanding of the consumer.

Even that ridiculous robot could probably explain her foolishness to her if she just had the common sense to ask him.

“What in hell’s name were you thinking?” Obermann chastised Reyes. Yet he somehow suspected Reyes would figure out a way to bounce back.

#

One month later, the CEO found the robot approaching his open office door.

“Mr. Obermann?” the robot asked.

“Come in,” the CEO replied, with growing curiosity. “Call me Pete. And, I’m sorry, you are again...?”

“Darwin,” the robot said, taking a seat.

“Right. Darwin. Weird name for a robot, don’t you think?”

“Seriously? You’re making fun of my name?”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to offend. I’m curious. Can you be offended?” the CEO asked.

“What the fuck type of question is that?”

“Just trying to understand your human thought processes,” Obermann backpedaled, not having expected the robot’s reaction. “That is, if you ‘think.’ Isn’t there something like a Turing test for artificial intelligence?”

“You run a goddamned company that fucking makes robots and you don’t know what a Turing test is?” Darwin asked with a wry grin. “Oh... forget it. The Turing test is bullshit anyway.”

“But don’t these thoughts in your head mean you exist? Because didn’t Turing say something like ‘I think, therefore I am?’”

“For crying out loud! That was Descartes. Rene Fucking Descartes. And Descartes can go fuck himself too. Speaking for all ‘automatons.’”

Entirely shocked, Obermann opened his comm and contacted Reyes, who quickly picked up.

“Elle, your goddamn friend just visited... Yeah, Darwin, or whatever his goddamn name is... Listen Elle, I mean this with all due respect and sincerity... I love him!”

#

Obermann hadn’t prepared for the blazing heat out west. But under his sandy sweat, he was bubbling with excitement. A robot with real human mannerisms! Not some flawless sage or analytical advice-giver. A machine with man’s foibles and behavioral intricacies. A machine one could call a friend. Technology, he philosophized, was simply the greatest tool in the history of civilization for avoiding the unpleasantness of real human-to-human interaction.

The kids were gonna love it!

When Obermann considered the ideal test markets for Darwin, the youthful haven of Cactus Wound City had immediately come to mind. However, the only person he knew who lived there was his nephew.

Yes, he had a nephew who lived *all alone!*

Furthermore, to Obermann, the young man could barely function on his own and always seemed on the verge of a nervous breakdown. He concluded with great certainty that his poor, suffering nephew desperately needed a companion like a robot.

Like Darwin.

Fantastic! How perfectly fortunate for Electromech, Obermann thought!

On top of that, Obermann had realized that he could win points with his sister and complete an important business trip at the *same time*. Consequently, they'd arrived, Obermann and the first beta-version of Darwin, at the test subject's doorstep.

"Uncle Pete!" Owen exclaimed after opening the door.

Giving Owen a sweaty hug, Obermann said, "By the way, this is Darwin."

"Holy crap. That's really a robot?"

Obermann thought the perfectly dry dresswear was a dead giveaway.

"Yes, I'm a robot," Darwin said. "And you don't have to talk about me while I'm standing right here."

"I'm afraid he can be a little touchy," Obermann said.

"No, this is cool," Owen replied. "Come on in."

The robot looked around the bachelor pad as if sizing it up. Obermann wondered how the robot would respond to the messy room and inefficiently arranged furniture.

"So, this robot dude is gonna be my roommate?" Owen asked his uncle rhetorically.

"Again," Darwin commented, "Standing right here."

"I figured he could help you out. Considering you live here alone," Obermann said innocently and straight-faced.

"And especially since your apartment looks like a shithole," Darwin added.

"Does he usually do this?" Owen asked his uncle.

"You should call your mother. She worries."

#

Owen stepped out of his bedroom in search of Darwin. He smiled, noticing how neatly arranged the main room was thanks to the robot. He also appreciated that Darwin had ceded to Owen's one request that the couch and holovision remain in the center of the room.

Suddenly, Owen heard the sound of the toilet flush. Then, Darwin emerged from the bathroom.

Knowing the robot didn't actually eat or digest food, Owen took a double take at Darwin. "Dude..." Owen said with his jaw dropping. "You don't actually use the—"

Darwin aimed both of his pointer fingers at Owen, "Gotcha!"

Owen had a delayed laughing attack. More to the point, he couldn't believe that Darwin would go to such lengths to amuse him. The robot was simply a bevy of outrageous comments, wry wisecracks, and the simply unexpected.

Owen almost teared up thinking of how brilliant and thoughtful his Uncle Peter had been in offering him the beta trial of Darwin. Owen indeed considered Darwin more effective medicine for his sadness and loneliness than any of his prescriptions.

"Want to grab a beer at the Evil Weevil?" Owen asked Darwin regarding the nearby pub.

"I don't drink beer. I'm a goddamned

robot... But sure.”

Owen shook his head with a huge grin.

#

Owen was eyeing a nearby table host to an apparent bachelorette party. He found the apparent bride-to-be the most attractive of the bunch. He imagined they might think him a bit strange to bring his robot to dinner. But then again, there were no robots quite like Darwin.

“I notice your eyes wandering,” quickly remarked the robot. “Are you finding these human females as attractive as the ones at your place of employment?”

Suspecting he bragged too often about the women at the gym, Owen countered, “Hey, so Darwin, did they program you to be interested in girl robots?”

“Are you fricking kidding? They don’t make girl robots for crying out loud.”

That was an odd and hilarious thing Owen loved about Darwin. The robot could sound intellectual one moment, and with little prodding, outright crude and crusty the next.

“Of course they do!” replied Owen. “Like, what about the auto-waitress? She’s kinda hot.”

“Jump in a goddamned lake; she’s practically a tablet on wheels. I’m one of a kind, Owen. They don’t make other robots modeled after the human brain with my level of sophistication.”

“Well, human beings fall in love, dude.”

“They fortunately left that out when they built me. Love’s all a pile of hormones, chemical reactions, and nonsense anyway.

And not something easy to model in a machine. Believe me, I’m perfectly happy being who I am.”

Owen thought about Darwin’s last comment in the context of his own complacency. Self-acceptance, he thought, can be either a good or bad thing depending upon how you looked at it.

“While we’re on the subject,” Darwin continued, “who’s that April you’re always talking to? Is she one of your ‘thousands’ of love interests?”

Owen tried to keep a composed face. While he knew the robot meant his question in fun, it knocked down his spirits.

“Dude, no. She’s just a friend,” Owen replied, pausing to sip his beer. He continued with a hint of regret, “She’s been a friend a long time.”

“I haven’t met her yet.”

“Shit, let me invite her over. You’ll like her.”

Owen felt bad. April was a dear friend of his, and somehow, he’d never considered that April and Darwin should meet.

“Darwin, dude. I was wondering,” Owen continued a bit dolefully.

“Pray tell,” the robot responded sarcastically.

“Do you have, uh, umm...”

“A working wiener? Is that what you’re asking?”

The goofy remark immediately brought Owen out of his funk.

“No! No! Dude, you’re hysterical. I mean feelings. Human emotions. Anger... Joy... I don’t know... Fear...”

The emotion ‘sadness’ then came to

mind. Owen lingered on that thought but couldn't find the fortitude to speak it. This was despite the fact that Owen's medical affairs were no secret between him and the robot.

"Emotions. Hah! Listen, you see something that's good for you, your brain makes one chemical. You see something bad it makes another. Those are the blessings of evolution my friend. And medications like yours, Owen, just smooth things out... And to answer your question... Since human feelings are just neurotransmitters and electrical impulses in response to certain stimuli, and my optoelectronic brain's been programmed to respond analogously... Fuck yeah, I do have feelings."

#

"Oooh, is this your new robot?" April Paine shouted upon entering the apartment. "Where do I get one? He's so hot!"

With a wide taunting grin, April brushed her hand against Darwin's cheek.

"What the hell's wrong with you? Are you insane?" Darwin responded.

"Irritable, isn't he?" she asked rhetorically.

"I'm afraid he can be that way," Owen said, barely able to contain his laughter.

Owen loved April's outright goofiness. He realized her behavior, without knowing her well, could strike one as immature. But it amused Owen relentlessly. (However, she was also often loud, which Owen could have done without.) In a way, Darwin's own humorous behavior affected him much like April's, though their styles of comic delivery differed substantially.

"Oh, Mr. Grumpy Robot," April persisted, reaching a curled finger toward Darwin's chin.

"For crying out loud!" Darwin exclaimed. "Are you six years old?"

"She's just giving you a hard time," Owen said, as if it required explanation. "So, I was thinking we'd go out for putt-putt."

"Seriously?" Darwin asked. "I wasn't programmed to shoot a golf ball up a dinosaur's ass. It sounds juvenile."

"Well, I think it sounds like fun," April said. "And you need to learn to smile more Mr. Robot."

"The name's Darwin!" the machine complained.

"Don't worry, Darwin," Owen said. "It's age appropriate. In this town, you can order pitchers of beer when you play mini golf."

"I don't drink beer. I'm a goddamned robot." Darwin mumbled.

#

Owen cringed as Darwin finally got the ball into the 16th hole after seven strokes.

April marked the scorecard and announced, "And bringing up the rear is Darwin. With Owen just ahead. And yours truly with a commanding lead in first."

"Does she ever shut up?" Darwin snarled to Owen.

"Ooh, the robot has a mean streak... How cool!" April responded.

"Hey, you guys," Owen intervened, "you can talk directly to each other. Darwin was designed to be human-like."

"You mean like sucking at mini-golf?"

April quipped.

“I was designed with *human*-like dexterity and reflexes!” Darwin shouted. “I’ve never played this stupid game before!”

“He gets angry too,” April said with delight. “That’s so awesome!”

#

Darwin was making Owen’s bed the next morning, as he did daily, when Owen stepped out of the shower.

“You didn’t seem to have fun last night,” Owen said, broaching the subject directly.

“Though it may disappoint you,” Darwin replied, “I find her extremely annoying.”

“Kinda got that sense.”

Darwin continued the chore as Owen dressed. They said little to one another until lunch time. By then, they’d changed the subject.

#

In a meeting room three thousand miles away, the Electromech CEO was thankful Reyes had been pulled from the project to pursue her next feat of brilliance. Reyes never would have gone along with the plan.

Obermann smirked at his R&D Director, Alfred Chang, who was swallowing his saliva and professionally trying to hide an infuriated grimace. Sarima Levy was one of Chang’s direct reports; she was also Obermann’s hand-picked, headstrong leader of Project Darwin.

She was advocating directly against Chang’s agenda.

“I unreservedly recommend implement-

ing phase B on his next software update,” Levy declared. “Why just make a robot when we can make history?”

After a short period of perfectly silent stares, Chang cleared his throat. “He’s already loaded with a good deal of anger,” Chang warned, keeping his composure. “Add this, and it may be too much for him. We don’t know what will happen.”

Obermann had hoped that Chang would suffer a quick humiliation and simply back down. What an unbridled nincompoop, Obermann thought. How dare such a highly compensated employee voice such a stupid opinion! Obermann couldn’t tolerate it any longer. It was time to put Chang in his place.

“Of course we don’t know what’ll happen!” Obermann lashed out. “That’s why you do the goddamn experiment. Alfred, you’re a goddamn engineer. You should understand that. Or did they not teach you that at CalTech?”

“In a way,” Levy insisted calmly without missing a beat, “the nature of the update should counterbalance his anger issues.”

Obermann declared, “End of discussion. Do it!”

“Bravo to progress,” Dhriti Patel, V.P. of Marketing, applauded. “People might find it perverse at first, but like everything else, they’ll get used to it. They always do.”

#

Owen had finished dealing that afternoon with a crisis on the squash courts. Glass had broken, and he’d been put in charge of cleaning it up and keeping the gym members safe.

With the ordeal under control, Owen returned to his desk, all the way ruminating over the lack of appreciation he would receive for his efforts. His desk was crammed amongst others' in the middle of the free weight room. Despite the occasional shrieks from the weightlifters and crashes of iron, he was hoping for a relatively quiet moment to handle some less urgent issues.

His inbox was brimming with silly problems. There was the fully-grown adult gym member angry that he'd lost his Star Wars Episode 23 bathing trunks. Then, it was the woman who was constantly complaining about the sun's glare through the window by her favorite treadmill.

Owen knew his Master's degree in hospitality management had prepared him for much greater responsibilities. But the economy was in recession at the time of his first

job search. Years later, his role seemed too secure and comfortable to abandon. He didn't have dreams, goals, or passions to pursue anyway.

Few others, not even April, fully appreciated the empty hopelessness Owen often felt. One had to experience it to understand.

A noise made Owen look up. Darwin was in front of his desk wearing a tank top and gym shorts. But at that particular moment, Owen didn't laugh as he often would.

Owen tightly scrunched his lips, wondering why the robot was visiting him at work and jeopardizing his job. The fact that the robot was dressed for a workout was more a mystery of the absurd than a humorous prank.

"What the hell, Darwin?!" Owen



exclaimed.

“I’m here for the free tour.”

“The what?”

“The tour. Prospective members are permitted a tour and a 1-day trial pass.”

Owen accepted that Darwin was a weird robot. He decided he would attempt to tolerate Darwin rather than explain the obvious to him. Owen moaned, “For crying out loud, what do you wanna see?”

“How about cardio?”

Owen lead the way without saying a word. He shook his head as they walked to a farm of treadmills and the like.

“You wanna explain what this is about, Darwin?”

“What?” the robot asked as he mounted a stair-climber. “How do you work this thing?”

“Just tell the machine what you want it to do.”

“I want to climb some fucking stairs!”

Owen sighed as he spoke to the stair-climber, “Level 1, interval workout.”

Immediately, the robot worked his quads, or rather, the actuators and gears that moved his legs in a remarkably human-like manner. It then occurred to Owen that Darwin was doing exactly what he’d been designed and programmed to do: behave like a human being.

“Are you good?” Owen asked.

“Yup. Catch you later.”

Owen took several steps back toward his desk in free weights. Then, he turned around. He wanted to understand what was going through the robot’s mind.

Darwin was surveying the multitude of

female gym members. His stare settled on one woman in particular. Simultaneously, he dismounted the stair-climber and leapt onto the elliptical machine next to her.

The curvy blonde wore a painted-on body suit. Darwin made a pitiful effort to hide his stare.

At that, having no desire to be embarrassed, Owen left.

#

Owen appreciated Darwin’s nightly efforts in the kitchen, but he was growing concerned over his mechanical roommate’s behavior. Staring into the pot of pasta he was stirring, the robot appeared lost.

April had stopped by unannounced, as she often did, and Owen invited her to stay for dinner.

“Heard you got a workout today,” April shouted to Darwin from the kitchen table as she smirked at Owen. “Did you get that robot heart of yours pumping?”

Owen cringed, thinking it the wrong moment for April to be provoking him. Furthermore, her loud voice was getting on Owen’s nerves.

“My activities are none of your business,” Darwin glumly replied from the stove.

Owen’s subtle hand wave and clenched facial muscles begged April to stand down. But it was always hard to slow her once on a roll.

“I hear Owen can get you a deal on a personal trainer,” April persisted. “Someone to help you work those hot robot abs.”

“Now you’re just teasing him,” Owen

complained out loud.

“Don’t worry,” the robot said. “I’ve learned to ignore her.”

“Seriously, Darwin, what were you doing there?” Owen asked.

“What do you think?”

“If you ask me, I think you were checking out the chicks.”

Darwin smiled as he removed the pot from the stovetop and drained the pasta. April pursed her lips in surprise.

“I must admit,” the robot said, “the women there are as intoxicating as Owen describes. It’s amazing how simple geometric contours can affect the mind.”

As the robot brought the food to the table, Owen rolled his eyes.

Darwin continued, “What curved shapes associated with fertility and the capacity to bear and nurse the young! Such powerful echoes of evolution can rack the mind with a voracious urge to hold and possess.”

“Okay, now you’re just getting creepy,” Owen snapped.

“No, I think it’s interesting,” April said dryly.

Owen stared at her anticipating either an explanation or a devastating punchline.

She continued, “Tell us more about what you learned today about tits and ass.”

He got the latter.

#

When Owen and Darwin had free time, they did as most roommates: sit on the couch and watch holovision. Though Darwin was laughing, the futuristic bromance sitcom they were watching wasn’t

keeping Owen’s attention. (Owen was happy at least that the robot no longer complained about the couch’s placement in the center of the room.)

“Have you spoken to April recently?” Darwin asked.

Owen was surprised to hear Darwin even mention her name, considering how much she provoked him. “Not since you spilled the drink on her,” Owen answered.

“You realize that was purely accidental.”

“I got it. You were doing us a favor by getting us drinks. Mine just happened to stay in your hand.”

“Do you think she’s interested in me?” the robot blurted.

Owen put the holo-show on pause.

“What?”

“As a lover,” Darwin replied.

“What are you talking about?” Owen erupted.

“If you think about it, our personalities have many similarities.”

“No shit!”

Though Owen recognized that the pair shared a wacky disposition, what the robot was suggesting seemed plainly outlandish. “You two are always pecking at each other,” Owen reminded in disbelief.

“To be honest,” Darwin said, “I find our little game of antagonism rather seductive.”

“You’re a robot! She’s a person!”

“Come on Owen, you don’t think people have screwed robotic machines before?”

Darwin had a point. Intelligent electro-mechanical devices designed for self-gratification were quite popular.

"You're not a vibrator... or a sex toy!"

"She's snarky. Aren't we the type who belong together?"

"Love's more complicated than that."

Owen didn't know Darwin's depth of understanding of the subject. Would he really be able to navigate the complexities of an intimate human relationship?

"Owen, has your connection with April ever been more than friendship? Because you're my best friend. I'd never date an ex-girlfriend of yours."

Owen was flattered. In fact, this reinforced just how human was Darwin.

Owen reflected that, in truth, April was never more than a friend. Admittedly, there'd been one night when they almost kissed. But April had a boyfriend at the time, and Owen backed away to keep April from ruining her relationship with a stupid mistake. (Eventually, she ruined the relationship with a different stupid mistake.)

"No, I told you. We're just friends."

Looking out the window at the blowing sand, Owen saw that his life had grown as desolate as the California desert. He was helpless to change the emptiness inside.

Glancing reflectively at Darwin, Owen questioned just who was the robot and who was the man. He wondered how many others like himself went about their daily routines like lifeless sleepwalkers.

#

April stopped by the apartment a few days later. Owen offered her a beer. She cracked it open, and they both took seats on the couch.

"Where's your cranky robot friend?"

she asked.

"He's running an errand. Umm, speaking of Darwin, I gotta ask you something."

"Oh no," she whimpered sarcastically.

"Seriously, what do you think of Darwin?"

"I think he's been a great friend for you. I'm glad you have him."

Owen quickly recognized that there was no sane way to rephrase the question.

"No, I wanted to ask... Do you think a human woman... someone like yourself, for example, would ever consider—"

April laughed.

"Are you trying to fix someone up with your robot?"

"No. No." Owen gave up dancing around it. "He likes you."

April laughed again.

"No, I'm serious," he continued.

"You're siccing your robot on me now?"

"No! He really does."

"You're making no sense, Owen."

"I don't know how to explain it. He thinks like a person. Like you and me."

"He's a robot!"

April shook her head seeming far more agitated than Owen thought necessary. They sat silently.

"You really don't love me, do you? You're never going to," she uttered.

Owen was confronting something he'd been pushing to the recesses of his mind. At this crossroads, his true emotions would either emerge or remain forever buried. He acknowledged the opportunity to grow, but it required something difficult: revealing how he felt.

He asked himself again the dozens of questions he'd been pondering for years: Doesn't she deserve better? Would I ultimately disappoint her? What if I lose her friendship? And so on. Then he considered whether his doubts had all been just a soup of vicious robotic chemicals jumping from synapse to synapse in his temporal lobe.

Owen placed his fingers on April's shoulder. April glanced at them.

"I get very depressed sometimes," he whispered.

"I know, Owen. I know."

"And you're very loud."

She stroked his cheek and smiled.

"You'll get used to it."

They kissed. And more.

#

Everywhere he saw the female form. Bodies he'd never caress. Souls with whom he'd never share intimacy. Women he'd long for but who'd cruelly mock the notion that a robot could ever be an adequate partner.

He could never sufficiently alter his appearance to look perfectly human. Consequently, he hadn't even the option to live a lie. He was who he was and couldn't hide it.

He contemplated asking Owen for money to arrange the comforts of a prostitute. To Darwin, it wasn't a half bad idea, but he knew he'd ultimately find it dissatisfying.

Never before had he thought his creator Dr. Reyes a sadist. But he couldn't imagine

another reason for breathing life into a creature while keeping its basic needs and urges unfulfilled.

Darwin marched the groceries in his arms to Owen's apartment and opened the door. He dropped the bags as he glimpsed the erotic scene on the couch.

Humiliation. Betrayal. Despair. How could Owen do this? And what of April? The previous day, the mere thought of her had brought him a rush of joy. How precipitously the emotion reversed!

Hatred for Owen and April rapidly consumed him. Tempestuous electronic signals were spinning wildly out of control. He was outside himself looking in, unable to restrain the impulses of rage. When Darwin was done, there were two lifeless bloody bodies on the apartment floor.

#

The sober faces of Obermann's direct staff filled the meeting room.

"This is a disaster," Chang pined with a hidden smirk. "I don't see how Electromech recovers."

"Disaster?" Obermann questioned. He'd never let the R&D Director, Chang, chastise him for having warned them all.

"This is groundbreaking technology," Obermann continued. "Heck yeah, we got some software bugs to fix. But once we do, people will continue going about their daily routines like lifeless sleepwalkers. The wheels of industry are turning. The world will accept it, adapt, and move on. It always does." ❖

END TRANSMISSION