

Corner Bar Magazine

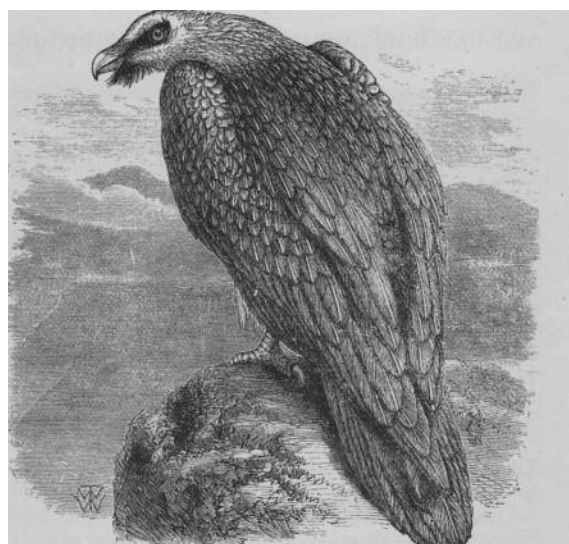
Volume 7 Number 5

Page 1 – KNOIST’S FORGOTTEN DAUGHTER by Harris Coverley. Mr. Coverley has had short fiction in *Curiosities*, *Hypnos*, *The Periodical*, *Forlorn*, and *Rivanna Review*, amongst many others. A former Rhysling nominee, he also has had verse in *PoluTexni*, *Star*Line*, *Spectral Realms*, *Scifaikuest*, *Tales from the Moonlit Path*, *Novel Noctule*, *Corvus Review*, *View From Atlantis*, *Yellow Mama*, and elsewhere. He lives in Manchester, England.

Page 7 – THE SCIENCE PROJECT by Ganesan Karthikeyan. Mr. Karthikeyan writes, “I am a practicing cardiologist in New Delhi, India. I often write on science topics for the lay public. I haven’t published any fiction so far. Hope to make a start with this one!”

Page 11 – GENES± by John Baldwin - Prior to the author’s retirement a few years ago, his career had involved only factual writing as a lawyer and entrepreneur. The transition to storytelling has proven to be a challenge - avoid boring; avoid formality; show don’t tell; try to entertain. As the transition progressed, he was fortunate to have had numerous stories published and to have been successful in writing contests. He resides in Southern California with his family close by.

Page 23 – THIS TIME: A SURVEYOR’S DIARY by David Paul Rogers Bio: David Rogers’ poems, stories, and articles have appeared in various print and electronic outlets, including *Star*Line*, *Third Flatiron*, and *Daily Science Fiction*. His collection of short fiction, *Emergency Exits*, is available from Amazon. More at Davidrogersbooks.com.



“KNOIST’S FORGOTTEN DAUGHTER”

by HARRIS COVERLEY

Jeffrey and Samantha had been dating for three months, making the time for each other at least twice a week and making love around once a fortnight; which was *all good* for Jeff, and he hoped for Sam as well.

They had had their evening meal at a nice restaurant, and Jeff had driven her back to her house in the suburbs by nine. With her company for over ten years, she could afford a nice new-build place for her and her daughter.

When they got through the door the babysitter greeted them with dreary disinterest, took her twenty pounds, and left with a few mumbles to indicate “thanks” and “goodbye”.

“She was a charmer,” Jeff said, his hands in his pockets. He eyed the pile of mail on the hall table, before observing the rest of the house and imagining himself quite at home. It would have certainly been an improvement over his present hovel.

“I like Erin,” Sam said, taking off her coat and hanging it on the stainless steel hook rack on the side of the stairway. “For a sixteen-year-old she’s got little-to-nothing going on; that means slim chance of trouble like horny boyfriends breaking through the backdoor, or wild sex parties in the *en suite*. Cup of tea?”

“Sure, please,” Jeff replied. He removed

and hung up his own coat, realised that it would have been best to have taken off Samantha’s *for her*, and internally berated himself for such a lapse in romantic etiquette.

He wandered into the front room, took a moment to scrape some dust off the top of the flat screen, clapped his hands of it, and turned to be face-to-face with Madelyn, Samantha’s young daughter, dressed in a pink nightgown, her mousey hair tied in a ponytail and hanging over her left shoulder.

The almost-six-foot man nearly cried out, but managed to stop himself. It certainly was a shock, although perhaps more for Jeff than many. He was not exactly a *paedophobe*, but he had never been particularly fond of children, especially since his own childhood. Her very presence made him anxious and cold in the head.

“Hello Jeffrey,” said the little girl, the voice cool, a minor smile on her thin lips.

“Hello...erm, *you*,” stumbled Jeff, inconveniently forgetting her name before it broke back into his mind. “Madelyn! MADDY! Yes...shouldn’t you be in bed?”

Jeff looked around—they were alone, no saving by the parent in the wings.

“I need my bedtime story Jeffrey,” Madelyn said, as though it was obvious.

“Didn’t that Erin give you one?”

“No,” said the girl, shaking a light head on a spindle neck. “Erin said that...*fictive narratives...are meaningless...*”

The girl struggled with the words and concepts, but she *was* still only nine years old.

Stupid Erin, thought Jeff. When you pay for monkeys you get peanutted, or whatever the phrase is.

“Well,” he started. “I’ll go ask your Mum if she can read to you.”

“Mum’s busy,” Madelyn said. “Could *you* read me a story?”

“Erm, I don’t think I’d be very good.”

Samantha entered the room carrying a tray, saying, “I think it’s a very good idea.”

She sat the tray on the coffee table and said to Madelyn, “Go upstairs and tuck yourself in. Jeff will be up in a minute to read to you.”

Madelyn with some eagerness made her way upstairs, as Sam sat Jeff down and handed him his tea.

“I don’t know about this Sam,” he said, genuinely worried, looking at his dull brown liquid.

“Don’t worry about it,” she sat next to him, putting a hand on his knee. “We’ve been reading through all the Brothers Grimm Fairy Tales. The next one is very short, I promise you.”

“I don’t know...I don’t think I fit well with kids. I think something’ll go awry.”

“Look,” she continued, rubbing the knee. “You do this for me, and you’ll have your own bedtime...*appreciation.*”

Jeff considered this: he had to read

with the daughter to please the mother, and the mother would be pleased with him. It was a simple transaction. The nature of the game.

He drank some more tea and then put the saucer over the top before standing up and stretching.

“A man’s gotta do...” he began, and promptly felt foolish.

“Yeah, read a bedtime story,” Sam laughed—she had taken it in a good way.

“I won’t be long.”

“*Don’t* rush it...she’ll know.”

Madelyn’s room was on the first floor at the back of the house, done in lilac paint on blank wallpaper and decorated with posters, paintings, and loose strands of fabric which did not amount to anything.

When Jeff entered, the girl was wrapped in her white sheets up to her chin, staring at the doorway.

She is not too bad, he thought. She at least has her mother’s better features...some kids are just painful to look at, particularly if their teeth are still coming in...

“Okay,” he said, and searched for a chair. He found one more child-sized than he preferred, but, unwilling to look elsewhere, pulled it up to her bedside.

The purple-blue paperback book was there on the side cabinet, *The Complete Grimm’s Tales*, adorned with the image of a colourful forest. He picked it up and checked the publisher: Worthleys Ltd., who were known for printing cheap editions of public domain works. He opened to the title page: Translated by Margaret Raine

Hunt, 1884.

1884? he thought. Would it be suitable for a nine-year-old?

“Do you like these stories Madelyn?” he asked her guardedly.

“They’re different and weird,” she replied without any pretence.

He was not entirely sure, but he turned to the bookmark on page five hundred and thirty-nine.

Sam had not been lying: it was very short, just one paragraph. No way that it would not be too long before the light was off.

“Story one hundred and thirty-eight,” he read. “This been going on a while?”

He looked back through the book and saw that it was indeed *Complete*; it even had the anti-Semitic tales included, which he was sure had provided for interesting discussions.

The girl was still waiting patiently, and he apologised. He went back to the right page, put the bookmark down, and read aloud in as authoritative voice as he could muster: “Knoist and his Three Sons”.

“What’s a name like Knoist?” she asked.

He was startled by this intervention.

“It’s a *name*,” he said. “Maybe somebody called Knoist might get sniffy about a name like Madelyn.”

That’ll shut her up, he thought.

He began: “Between Werrel and Soist there lived a man whose name was Knoist, and he had three sons.”

“Where’s Werrel and Soist?” the girl asked.

“An hour’s drive away,” Jeff lied. But he immediately felt mean, and decided to correct it: “No, sorry, I was thinking of somewhere else. They’re towns in Germany.”

“Where in Germany?”

“South,” which was a new lie. He had no idea where they were...in fact, it annoyed him.

He put the book down and searched for both names on the browser on his smartphone, but nothing came up.

“South,” he repeated to the child, replacing his phone with the book. He recovered the page: “One was blind, the other—”

“I’ve been thinking about Knoist,” she cut in.

Jeff sighed: “Like what?”

“Is it like, related to moist?”

“No...maybe...I don’t know...”

This is hell, he thought. Sam tricked me. It’s a test of endurance.

“Let’s find out!” he said, returning to the page.

“One was blind,” he repeated, “the other lame, and the third stark-naked.”

“What does ‘lame’ mean?” asked Madelyn.

“He can’t walk properly.”

“Why?”

“The *only way we can find out* is by *reading on*.”

He continued: “Once on a time they went into a field, and there they saw a hare. The blind one shot it, the lame one caught it, the naked one put it in his pocket.”

Jeff stopped—none of this sounded

right. The girl waited patiently for the tale to continue.

“Finding this okay?” he asked her, and she nodded. He eyed her and continued: “Then they came to a mighty big lake, on which there were three boats, one sailed, one sank, the third had no bottom to it.”

“Is this where they get moist?”

“I *don't know*...let me read it.”

Jeff carried on aloud: “They all three got into the one with no bottom to it.”

He stopped again: the story was nonsense. How *could* a child get this? He for one could not. He had never cared for any absurdities, even as a boy.

“Shall we read something else?” he asked the girl with hope. He flipped over to the next page and saw that the succeeding tale “The Maid of Brakel” was just as brief, if not briefer.

“Why not the nice story of a good young maid?”

“No,” the girl said bluntly. “Let’s finish this one.”

“But it doesn’t make any sense.”

“*This one!*” she remarked firmly, with that full body flex that annoyed children do.

“But it’s crap!” he swore, and instantly felt bad. He was getting over-excited.

“I’m sorry,” he mumbled in apology, reopening the book.

“You said a bad word,” she said.

“Please don’t say anything...I’ll read you the rest.”

He found his place and read to her: “Then they came to a mighty big forest in which there was a mighty big tree; in the

tree was a mighty big chapel—in the chapel was a sexton made of beech-wood and a box-wood parson, who dealt out holy-water with cudgels.”

It was finally over. He ignored the epigram underneath the story and closed the book.

The girl’s face, still locked between duvet and pillow, looked accusingly up.

“Was that it?” she asked with narrowed eyes.

“Yes,” he said with little confidence.

“So Knoist was *related* to moist?”

“Apparently so.”

Madelyn shifted slightly, pulling her duvet down, her eyes facing the ceiling.

Jeff stared at her. The girl possibly could not have known what was going on... but he resisted asking her anything. It was done. Finished.

“Don’t you believe?” she asked suddenly.

Startled, he said, “I’m sorry?”

“Don’t *you* believe?”

Her eyes had become intense, pointed. He felt his soul being dug into.

Jeff rose and dragged his seat to the side of the cabinet.

“Goodnight Madelyn,” he said, not looking at her. “Sleep tight, and so on...”

Without checking her he crossed the threshold, switched off the bedroom light, and closed the door.

In the hallway, Jeff leaned against the wall and breathed deeply. What the hell was that thing about “believing”? Did she *know* something he did not? Did she know that he had missed something out? That

much was true—but how *could* she?

“Stupid Erin,” he said to the wall.

At least it was over—he could return to Sam and receive his reward.

He began to walk. And walk.

It seemed to be taking an awfully long time to get to the landing, but he got there and turned to the top of the stairs. But something caught his eye.

There was new furniture at the far end of the landing; at least he thought it new. He had not noticed it the last time he had been upstairs in the house.

He went towards it. It was not a cabinet or a chest of drawers. It did not seem to actually have any practical function. It was made of a roughish wood and seemed vaguely humanoid.

Forget it, he thought. I’ll ask Sam about it, or not...

He turned back and started down the stairs.

Like with the hallway, it took a long time. In fact, after twenty seconds of descending, Jeff realised he had not been moving at all, even though that was impossible.

He stopped and looked down. He felt *very* high up. Far more high up than he could have been in physical reality. He looked back up the stairway. The landing appeared *incredibly* distant.

“This is just nerves,” he said to himself in a pained whisper. “If I run...”

There was a rush air from below him and he spun around to see a crash of clear waves fill the hallway beneath.

He bellowed and grabbed hold of the

bannister rail which shook furiously in the flood.

The waters steadied and began to rise step by step.

“Sam!” he yelled. “Sam!”

The waters covered the ground level doorways and continued upwards. They grew a deeper and denser cerulean blue as they swelled, white patches of foam bubbling across the surface in paroxysmal continents.

“Sam!” he yelled again, but it was no use. She was a goner, but he knew he had to save the child.

Jeff twisted around to go back upstairs, and was in an instant already at the landing, but not alone.

That piece of ugly furniture at the end of the landing had moved to cover the stairway.

He looked into its sullen brown eyes—it was the parson with his cudgel.

The arboreal being raised its blunt implement, spraying Jeff with a pint of holy water which burned the skin of his face, neck, and hands like it was bleach.

Its shrill and abhuman voice rang out the unread epigram of the tale:

“How truly happy is that one

Who can from holy water run!”

The cudgel came down upon Jeff’s head as he screamed, and he was thrown backwards into the waters.

Sam had been engaged in the very domestic activity of moving some little homemade cakes from two smaller containers into a larger one when she heard a male cry.

She dropped a vanilla butterfly bun on the floor as she rushed out of the kitchen and into the hallway. There was a strange smell that put her in mind of camping in the Lake District as a university student.

“What’s wrong?!” she shouted.

She found Jeff at the foot of the stairs. He was soaked to the bone, skin grey, face bloated, eyes open in permanent terror, a cavernous red mark across his forehead. Only he and the carpet beneath his body were wet.

As Sam stood there, her mouth hanging open, sure of nothing, a small, sweet voice came from above: “He didn’t believe.”

Sam looked up to see her daughter standing where the parson had stood, observing the grim scene.

“Madelyn,” Sam stammered. “Go back to bed...there’s...there’s been a terrible accident, I...”

“He didn’t believe,” the girl repeated with a knowing smile. “He didn’t Mummy, he didn’t...” ❖

“THE SCIENCE PROJECT”

by GANESAN KARTHIKEYAN

He looked up at the three evaluators in nervous anticipation, waiting for the interview to begin.

“Things hardly ever go wrong in nature anymore” the lady on the left looked up at him, breaking the silence. “Technology has ensured that.”

He wasn’t sure if that was a question. The ability to precisely predict and prevent adverse events in the biological and physical universe was the reason for our longevity and prosperity. He nodded his agreement. Any perception of technology-scepticism wouldn’t go down well, particularly with the AI evaluators. The prep manuals were very clear on this.

“So then, why would you even wish to let events progress un-intervened?” she asked. “Why increase uncertainty?” She was clearly sceptical.

This was the central question underlying his little experiment, and the one he had had the greatest difficulty getting across to his AI supervisors. He had hoped that it would arise later in the evaluation, after he had demonstrated his technical competence. The success probability indicator on his personal screen plunged a full seven points. He knew that they would be able to see his stress indicators go up. But they would also be aware that he had no anxi-

olytic nanos in his blood, not even the permitted ones. That must surely count for something!

He scanned the three faces in front of him, willing himself to be calm, as he launched his presentation algorithm. He knew he had to quickly identify the human on the panel (there had to be one; that was the rule). A machine would never understand. He could wow them with the technicalities for sure; he was particularly proud of the time-condensation protocols that he had developed for the project. He was certain that somebody higher-up would be interested in them. But the rationale was the key. If they weren’t convinced, he wouldn’t be cleared. He shuddered to think what that meant; an eternity of mind-numbing programming. Or worse still, to suffer the fate of the “comfortable” masses; relegated forever to that purposeless life, in those self-contained pods, permanently hooked to the government-mandated happiness cocktails.

“Human happiness is a function of mortality and uncertainty,” he began. “A moment in time is of greater value, if it is scarce, and if the pleasures it offers are fleeting, or if their duration is uncertain.”

Start with your punchline, the manuals had urged. He searched the faces in front

of him for any indication of whether his blasphemous premise had registered. The probability indicator on his monitor did not budge. Over the past several million years, humankind had conquered the universe, owing mostly to its ability to influence the probability of natural events. And all this was done with the sole purpose of increasing human happiness. And here he was, a mere fledgling, arguing for the exact opposite. He was a little disappointed at the lack of any visible reaction.

He went on to describe the reasons why he had chosen that little planet from that distant galaxy for his experiment. But as he had anticipated, they were more interested in his time-condensation protocol. The lady on the right was particularly impressed.

“That’s an elegant way you’ve found to miniaturise time and then examine it at will, under any desired magnification! Pure genius!”

The probability counter was now hovering around 99%. But he was strangely, disappointed. This was not the point of his experiment!

“I tested the effect of complete non-intervention,” he continued, hoping to draw them in again.

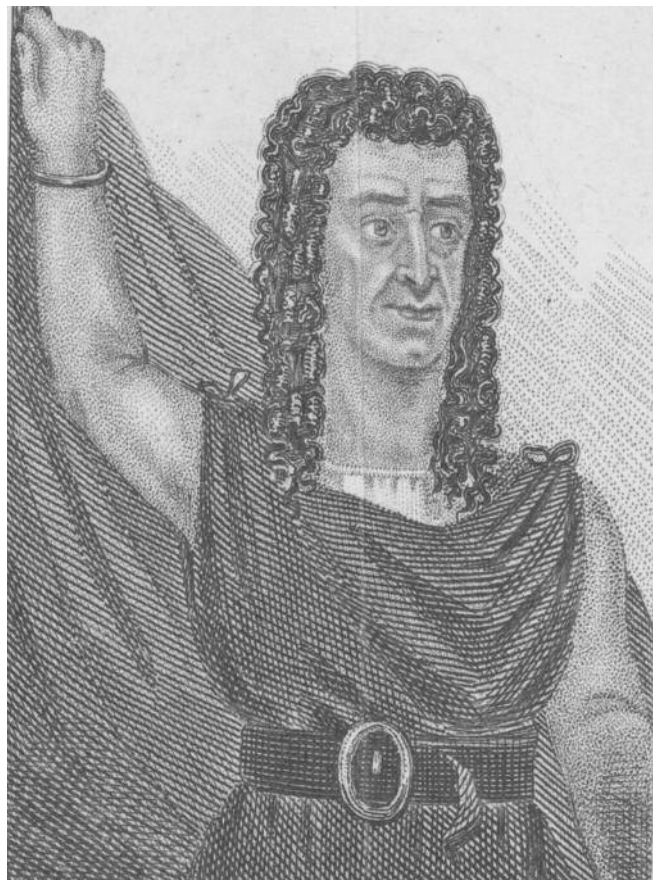
“That’s not strictly true,” said the man in the middle, speaking for the very first time.

He was right of course. He was referring to the reset that was necessitated by the emergence of dominant non-anthropomorphic life forms on his planet. In keeping with the objectives of the experiment,

which were focused on humans or human-like beings, he had had to do a partial reset. But it had been done in consultation with his supervisors, and more importantly the funders. Understandably, they were the ones who were very keen on it. In any case, it was all well documented and above-board. But the reset had not been uneventful. Thanks to a few minor miscalculations by his human supervisor, it had turned nearly fatal to the experiment. He hoped they wouldn’t bring that up.

Thankfully, they didn’t.

“Fair enough,” said the man. “But, you’ll have to tell me why you think your experiment is a success.”



This had to be the human on the panel! All the AI pre-evaluators he had engaged were sure that his experiment had failed. He decided to focus all his attention on the man. The others were less important. He wondered how many light-years away he was beaming in from. He wondered how old he was. Perhaps, he too had in some remote past dredged the Archives in search of our pre-evolution.

Emboldened by the thought, he continued. He told them that even though there had been random events of death, disease and mass destruction on his planet, he was confident that the subjects continued to revel in the little pleasures that their short and uncertain lives afforded them. He told them how his monitors had assessed them at many points over the course of the experiment and found them to be surprisingly content with their lot. He put up the statistics on the display with a triumphant flourish. He contrasted this with the flat, stimulant-induced affect of 99.9999% of the human race today. He knew that the numbers were really impressive. Even his AI co-supervisors had been surprised. He could see that the two ladies were processing the information. But the man seemed unconcerned.

“So you played God!” he said, almost playfully.

God! He was aware of that pre-historic concept! A kindred spirit! The two ladies exchanged puzzled glances.

“Yes I did.” He couldn’t help grinning. “But I never intervened in their lives,” he added hastily. “I only altered major-event

probabilities only when absolutely needed, in keeping with the objectives of my experiment.”

“Ha! An omnipotent, but disinterested God!” the man laughed. A gentle, friendly laugh. The two ladies seemed completely lost. This was a good thing, he thought. He had to press home the advantage, before their circuits recovered.

“Also,” He continued from where he’d left off. “There have been no great works of art, the ultimate expression of a creative intelligence, in the last few million years.” He paused very briefly, searching for the beginnings of any reaction. There were none.

He had hoped that at least one of them would bring up those hideous hyper-drive ports and mining stations as high art. He had prepared a devastating takedown of those monstrosities. Too bad.

“Without the unpredictable highs and lows of life, great individual achievement, and a successful civilisation are not possible,” he said, looking intently at the man.

“So, do you think the human race isn’t a success?” The lady on the left had recovered sufficiently. The stern expression was back on her face.

It was ironic that a humanoid should claim to understand if the human race was a success or not, he thought. But all the prep bots had predicted this, and so he had a ready answer.

“It depends on the metric you use,” he said. “By the measures of health, longevity, and technological advancement, many think that we may have reached our peak,

but from the point of view of individual accomplishment, and intrinsic happiness, we're arguably at an all-time low."

"So you think we are not happy?" Asked the man in the middle, leaning back, with the slightest hint of a smile on his face. He was clearly enjoying this evaluation.

"My hypothesis is that the relationship between the probability of failure of natural systems, and intrinsic human happiness is non-linear, and has a finite peak. And we are at present well into the descending limb of this curve," he replied.

He paused, expecting a barrage of questions. Oddly, there were none. He glanced at his screen. In all the excitement, he had missed the drop in the probability figure. To his dismay, it was at 71%, and falling rapidly. The blasted AIs!

And then, his heart sank, as he realised that the evaluation was over. This was so abrupt! He had hoped to see their reactions! Was it a time-triggered termination? Or had he done something wrong?

The three of them were already up on their feet and were now thanking him. This was it! They shook his, by now clammy hand, and beamed out, leaving him alone and despondent, staring at his personal screen.

"I think he'll make an extraordinary programmer," said the second AI cheerily.

"But he has unconventional ideas," replied the first one. "They cannot be encouraged!"

"Oh, he's just 7 years old! He'll out-

grow them, surely," the old man cut in. "But we all agree that he's brilliant, don't we?"

The two humanoids nodded in unison. There was a brief pause.

"Then we should let him to do what he likes with his life."

The old man authorised the clearance without waiting for a response. He was relieved that these two were amenable to human override.

The original material and the evaluation logs were encrypted and uploaded to the Archives.

"Alright. That's settled then." said the first humanoid as she was dematerializing. "I'll leave instructions for safe disposal of the remains of the experiment as per protocol 42."

"No!" said the old man. His voice had risen sharply and the humanoids froze in mid motion. They turned around slowly, visibly confused.

"Leave it alone. It's just a science project!" ❖

“GENES±”

by JOHN BALDWIN

Byron Langer was already awake when the alarm sounded. A fitful sleep as usual. Only thirty-four, he felt half again older this morning. He'd been gloomily contemplating the day to be faced. A mild hang-over. Nothing in the fridge for breakfast. Car in the shop. His semi-annual review at work...can't lose that job. His girlfriend of several months having bailed on him. Tossing back the covers, he swung his feet off the bed. Then carelessly stepped on the iPad he had laid on the floor. His ankle twisted and he fell awkwardly.

“Oh, shit!” he muttered to himself, nursing the pained leg. “Is that a preview for today, this year 2045, or the whole rest of my life?” He switched on the morning news.

“...The bill just introduced in the Senate would make the Bible required reading for all students. To start in grammar school and continue on through high school. Passing the Testament Comprehension Test would become a requirement for graduation. The bill seems assured of going through. In other news...”

Still musing, “Jesus, one more reminder that the Religious Right controls our government”. He couldn't conceive of how any benevolent God could abide so much pain and misery in the world. So, he considered himself an agnostic. Dangerous

to admit that in public nowadays.

Byron later limped into his favorite coffee shop. “A latte please Kathy, I'm really needy.” With the drink and a bagel in hand he turned, stumbled favoring his hurt ankle, and bumped into a pretty customer. The drink spilled on his shirt. “Oops, so sorry,” he said to her. “I'm such a klutz.”

“That's O.K. No damage here. Hey, limping warrior, sit down for a sec. I'll grab some paper towels for emergency aid. The wet spot should dry quickly.”

They sat and he watched passively as she patted at his damp shirt. *Damn*, he thought to himself. *She's really cute. Sparkling green eyes. Fetching dark short hair. Nicely...hmm... proportioned.* He forgot for the moment his depressed situation.

“I'm Byron, by the way. Guess you're an angel sent to help clumsy strangers.”

“Yes, I am,” she saucily replied, “though my name here on earth is Darcy.”

They joked and conversed briefly. Both had to hustle on to work. Still, they felt an instant attraction. “Darcy, what say we meet again soon. When we can linger and I'm less of a doofus.”

“I'd be up for it Byron, but I don't live or normally work in this area.” She appraised his almost handsome, slightly

shaggy blonde looks. “Tell you what, though. At great personal risk I’ll grant you my phone number.”

He unsuccessfully searched his pockets for a pen. “Worse luck. Oh, well, just tell me. I won’t forget.”

She gave him her number and they parted company.

He headed for the office with a slight glow from the warm encounter with Darcy. Arrived at the same time as his best friend Jeff.

“Hey pal,” he was greeted. “Work reviews today, right? To be praised as champions or be denigrated as failures!”

“Thanks for the encouragement, Jeff,” answered Byron sourly. “I’ve already got a bad feeling about it.”

“Oh, you’ll survive. Everybody appreciates you here... uhhh...except maybe our boss, Vice Pres Handler. He’s an old school hard ass. The problem is you don’t toot your own horn or kiss it up with him enough. He needs to know of your value.”

Byron responded, “Well, I can’t just announce that, and pretty sure no one else will.”

“Anyway,” said Jeff cheerfully, “at least we can look forward to our basketball game Saturday at the Park. Three straight losses for us to the Wranglers. Maybe it will be our Raptors’ turn to win.”

Announcement heard: “All staff please assemble in the conference room. Personal reviews to follow.”

When all employees were seated, Mr. Handler entered and addressed the group.

“Our company is determined to exceed

projections by year end. That will be up to the people in this room. That’s why these personal reviews are critical. They’re meant to encourage where warranted and criticize if deserved. You’ve all been through this. I’d welcome any suggestions as to how this process might be made more effective.” He looked around the table not really inviting or expecting any response.

Jeff raised his hand.

“Yes, Jeff. A suggestion?”

“Sir, our team here is only successful when we work together – collaborating and brainstorming. Some people here are particularly good at accomplishing this. Co-workers know who these implementers are, but management may not. I’d suggest you consider in your reviews the opinions we all might have regarding our fellow employees.”

Pondering this, Mr. Handler declared, “That’s a damn good idea. So good, in fact, that I will postpone all reviews until the end of the week. I’ll ask everyone before then to anonymously submit their points of view on the subject.”

As it ended up, Byron’s review at the end of the week was not that bad.

Mr. Handler even offered some constructive advice: “You’re a bright and personable guy. I discovered how respected you are by everyone here. Frankly though, a spark still seems to be missing. I expect more from you. More drive. More energy. Rise to your potential.”

He’s absolutely right. Byron thought. *True for my personal life too. Unlucky in romance...hell, unlucky in life!! Just like Dad*

maybe? He failed at everything. Business ventures. Marriage. Self-control. Poor reflexes of all kinds. Not a bad person though and a good father for sure.

Saturday rolled around. Byron joined the other players on the basketball court. His talent was apparent, but rather erratic. At an even six feet he couldn't outjump the much taller opponents, but he had a good eye, was aggressive and an unselfish passer. Fortunately, his ankle had healed - no excuses for that.

The game was fiercely fought. The Wranglers had expected to have their usually dominant game. But Byron's team kept it close...110 to 108 with just seconds left in the fourth quarter. Calling a time out, the Raptors player coach stated the obvious - they needed a desperation three-point shot to pull this out.

"Byron, you're our best chance for shaking loose and scoring." The other players nodded in recognition of this.

The game renewed. Pass inbounds to Byron. He briefly dribbled, faked out his defender and let fly. All players froze as the ball arced toward the rim. Hitting it, the ball bounced high and looked likely to drop into the hoop. Achingly, it was not to be. Game over. Good sport compliments from Wranglers players. Encouragement to Byron by his disappointed teammates. He didn't forgive himself for the failure.

"So close. So fucking close. How can this keep happening to me?" he pondered. "My lack of confidence, plain bad luck, or some kind of karma curse?"

Searching for a positive thought, he

remembered Darcy. They'd hit it off. He had her number. *Hmmm...Let me think. It was my area code, then 709-1562, or was it 1652, or 2156. God damn it, I can't recall for sure. Too many other things scrambled in my mind. I do know from my old statistics class that there are a possible 720 different combinations of four numbers. Hopeless.* He cursed himself for losing this enticing opportunity. Dim chance of ever crossing paths with her again. Once again the dispiriting 'day late and a dollar short.'

Sweaty and disheveled after the game, he headed home. True to his routine, he stopped by the minimart for some food essentials. He bought a lottery ticket as usual. "Why not? Somebody has to win, so they say." To his hopeful eye, the numbers looked promising. Yeah, there were both lucky 7's and an 11. These would be winners in craps why not in the lottery? he illogically surmised, as gamblers are wont to do. He bought a candy bar as a mood enhancer for the short trip.

Continuing the walk, he passed by a little dog huddled by a wall and shaking. Byron looked around for an owner to no avail. He had a soft spot for puppies, so picked him up to check for return information on the collar. He was rewarded by a tenacious bite. It broke the skin and bled profusely.

"Ow. Christ!" he belted out loud, dropping the dog who promptly took off. Was this just an example of truth in the saying *No good deed goes unpunished?* More likely, it was just his ill fortune. He recalled the old Lil Abner comic strip which had a charac-

ter, Joe Btfsplik, with a perpetual black storm cloud over his head. It signaled that bad things perpetually happened to him. Carl looked up to check, but the sky was clear. Figuratively, though, he felt a kinship.

To accomplish something positive as he resumed his walk, Byron called his mother. She answered cheerfully as always. "How's my superhero son today? Any news to share with your adoring mother?"

"Nothing really new. I'm still employed, haven't been arrested, car's in the shop... and girlfriendless right now. Oh, and was just bitten on the street by a strange dog."

"You're such a kidder. Haven't heard from you in days, I supposed you were overwhelmed at work."

"No, not so much. Why did you believe that?"

"Well, yesterday was my birthday. Didn't hear anything from you. You know how lonely I have felt since your Dad and I separated. Have had trouble sleeping and even thinking straight."

"Yeah, sure, I understand. What are chances though of you and he getting back together?"

"Not likely. I don't blame him anymore. I never felt pretty or interesting enough to hold on to him. He was bound to look elsewhere."

"You're too hard on yourself. He could be a real jerk."

"I suppose. But haven't been that great of a mother either. Or else you'd come see me more often."

"That's my fault and I'll make up for it. Try to perk up. Love you, Mom."

"We'll see. And Son, be sure and have that dog bite treated. Risk of rabies or serious infection."

"Sure, Mom, will do."

Byron recalled there was an Urgent Care Center just two blocks away. At least he could avoid further harm from man's best friend.

A handful of unhappy people were crowding around the reception desk of the Center vying for attention for their medical needs. After a short wait he saw the doctor who examined and tended to the bite. The necessary shots were given. It occurred to Byron that they might conflict with his blood pressure medicine but didn't mention this. The doctor's parting remark: "You could experience a slight fever, dizziness, some other minor symptoms. Otherwise, you're good to go."

When leaving, a guy entering the office rudely bumped against him. Byron had a macho impulse to confront him, but it didn't seem worth the effort.

Another mile's walk to get home and he was suddenly feeling drowsy, so he slumped onto a bench outside the drugstore. Took out his candy bar, then promptly nodded off. The next thing he felt was a prodding by the stick of a uniformed police officer.

"Hey buddy, you can't sleep it off here."

Byron tried to think straight but felt muddled. Suddenly he became violently ill and vomited, just missing the cop's polished shoes.

"Say fella', you seem to be in a bad way,"

said the Officer “I better see some ID. There’ve been some petty thefts occurring at our stores recently. Unkempt strangers are immediate suspects.”

Byron, feeling too ill to speak, searched his pocket for the wallet, but it was missing. “Officer,” he slurred, “somebody took it. I’ll bet it was that guy at the Urgent Care Center. I had a bad reaction to shots. See, I was attacked by a dog after losing the ball game.” He struggled to sound coherent.

“Listen, please, I live around here.” He sounded like a nut.

“Yeah, well, I need you to get in the car where we can straighten this out.”

Still feeling disoriented from effects of the shot, he sat in the back of the police car looking gloomily out the window. The cop had gone into the store. Probably to inquire whether he might have stolen something. Passersby peered with curiosity at the character who was seated in the back seat - obviously under arrest. Could it get more humiliating than that? Yes, it could. One face looking in at him was...horror of horrors... Darcy his coffee shop dream girl, whose number he’d forgotten. She saw him lurch forward in the seat, scrambling to open the door or roll down the window to, what...explain himself? He could only pray that in his disheveled condition she wouldn’t recognize him. Just as well that the window and doors couldn’t open. Oh, right. TV has shown us that suspects can’t exit patrol cars. Well, that’s just great!

The officer returned. By this time, Byron was coherent and explained what had happened. “Damn,” remarked the

policeman, “that is one fucked up day. Poor bastard. I’d be glad at least give you a ride home.”

“Thanks Officer, but if neighbors see me arrive in a police car, it might only make matters worse. Appreciate the offer though.”

Byron resumed his walk home, hoping merely that it would be uneventful. He felt permanently enmeshed in a biblical Job level of miseries.

Upon reaching his place he collapsed onto the couch and closed his eyes. He focused on a single question: What can I do? Bad fortune had plagued him since he was an adult. And not just occasionally. And not even because, in most cases, he hadn’t brought it on himself. He’d sought guidance from many sources for his situation.

The psychologist counseled by pursuing his pet theory. The cause of Byron’s distress must be rooted in the relationship with his father. Byron knew better. “No, it was not. He was a good Dad to me.”

His problems were not resolved from well-meaning religious figures either. *The suffering is God’s test of your faith. Suffering is the natural state of man awaiting the eternal joys of Heaven*, etc. These proclamations had no meaning for this agnostic.

Then there were the assurances by self-help gurus. One need only follow their seminar-delivered prescriptions for self-awareness to be fulfilled. Just mind-games profiting the promoter, as he saw it.

Not least of all, there was the darkest of answers available. Too often it was

teenagers, who could not bear the disappointments, rejections, and pain in their lives. In desperation, they might choose to end them. Not a solution for Byron.

Speaking aloud to himself: "It's a dead end to think about this. I'm exhausted. If this were a drama about my life, I'd be both the main character and the nemesis villain! Oh, Hell." Feeling exhausted, he needed a temporary escape with a nap. Sleep came quickly.

Upon awakening an hour later and somewhat refreshed, Byron recovered his mail. Included were the usual ads for things he didn't need, utility bills, charities and politicians pleading for donations ...and a slim package addressed to him from the Gentel Institute, whatever that might be. He immediately unwrapped it to find a standard holoivid disc, with an accompanying note

Dear Mr. Langer:

The Gentel Institute is the world leader in providing gene modification procedures to improve the lives of individuals. As you know, genetic inheritance occurs due to genetic material, in the form of DNA, being passed from parents to their offspring. Today genome editing can be used as a tool to revise one's DNA.

We have reason to believe that you are a long-time sufferer from inherited mental and emotional conditions for which no relief has been found. We are confident that Gentel would be able to correct most of such difficulties permanently as it has for thousands of others. Our work has been made illegal due to the present governments' religious and anti-science policies. We know you also oppose these. Therefore, this

invitation must be kept secret. We will contact you in a few days. If, after viewing the attached holoivid, you have decided to proceed with this solution, an appointment will be set.

He started the player and a greying distinguished man, identifying himself as Doctor Ivan Fielding, the Director of the Gentel Institute, appeared by hologram. Greeting Byron by name he proceeded to explain everything about the organization; its work over many years; and an explanation of genome alteration and its amazing advances. He addressed almost every question Byron might have had. Regarding *why me*, the Doctor said:

"You have been identified as an ideal candidate. Everything about you, the problems you suffer, your family history, is known. Blame social media and our ability to still tap government resources for obtaining such intimate personal data. The fact is that certain genes in your body contain some undesirable inherited characteristics of your parents."

Hearing this, Byron instantly felt defensive, then reflected. "Well, I suppose they are flawed in some ways."

"There are 20,500 genes coiled up in DNA in the human body. Many of these were identified in the past for treatment of diseases - cancer; heart disease; mental illness. The Institute has gone beyond this to concentrate on other problems such as emotional disturbances, behavior flaws, phobias, addictions. From our research we have identified the exact genes that match up with the conditions that plague you. That makes you a very special and important subject for our continuing research. As a result, there wouldn't even be a charge for this otherwise

very expensive process.”

Byron hoped for a few more answers: “What would be involved in the manipulation of my genes? Would it hurt? Be dangerous? Recovery time?”

“...so stated most simply, gene editing involves cutting the DNA in question, then adding, deleting or replacing pieces of genetic material. It would not be invasive or unsafe and requires no recovery time, though we’d retain you overnight for observation purposes.”

But, he further wondered, why should the government oppose something that is so beneficial to its people?

“The Christian fundamentalists in charge consider it a sacrilege to medically alter the established functions of the human body for any reason. Antibiotics and anesthetics are allowed only by a tortured interpretation of the Bible. Our work, as well as say, fertility procedures, have been made illegal. We must be guarded and so for our security we have prepared this holovid and the note to self-delete within hours.”

Byron thought long and hard about this in the following two days. Ultimately, the prospect of removing the black cloud that had afflicted him won out. So when he received a late-night phone call from the Institute he quickly responded, “I’m completely sold and eager to move ahead. What’s next?”

As scheduled, a limousine was waiting when he stepped out of his apartment the next morning. The driver greeted him amiably but explained the need for his blind-folding because the location of the Gentel Institute had to remain undisclosed. He

complied.

Arriving at the facility and removing the mask, he was escorted up the stairs to a no-frill’s office. There he was greeted amiably by the in-person Doctor Fielding.

“I’m pleased that you decided to undertake this. I feel sure that it will result in a more fulfilling life for you.”

Byron had just two remaining questions: “First, which of my genes would need to be modified?”

“The genes to be targeted are those mostly responsible for your: fear of failure known as ‘atychiphobia;’ slower reflexes and reaction times; ataxia effecting optimum balance and coordination; stress sensitivity; need for restful sleep – known as the “thatcher gene”; and insecurity – effecting the opioid system.”

“Jesus!”

The usually serious Doctor chuckled. “Christ has nothing to do with this. These are all human corrections...not miracles. Though it might seem so. “

Byron asked his final question: “Since this would seem a medical procedure, whether or not it is invasive, aren’t there necessarily some risks involved.”

“Glad you asked that. It’s always possible that there might be some minor unintended consequences, but nothing that can’t be fixed. I guarantee that the Gentel Institute would always be available to provide a needed correction.”

“That’s it then...I’m more than ready for changes to my life!”

He felt both thrilled and frightened by

what was to follow. He was prepped by the nurse. Wheeled to the operating room containing space age looking computers and technical equipment. Secured rigidly but comfortably in a seated position. Some kind of complicated device affixed to his head. Several medical staff encircled his table. Anesthetic received. Last memory was counting down: "One, two, three...fourteen...twenty." Slipping into unconsciousness. Dimly hearing fragments of remarks by staff:

"Are we sure?" "So fucking complex."
"Groundbreaking, if..."

For many hours after, he drifted in and out of awareness in the recovery room.

When fully awake, Doctor Fielding came to announce the assumed success of the procedure. "You'll only become fully aware of the changes in your behavior over time. However, there are some quick tests that can afford us a preview."

He proceeded with a range of questions to test Byron's perceptions and attitudes. It was apparent from spontaneous answers that he had become more confident, quicker, and decisive. Wow! He acknowledged feeling great and somehow renewed. After spending the night as required for recovery, and given a handshake from the Doctor, he was driven home... again blindfolded...that still seemed weird, but so what. He felt like a new man and was eager to reenter the world.

Byron awoke the next day feeling amazingly refreshed for this workday. His first action from bed was to call the auto repair shop.

"It's taken some extra time. We'll need a couple more days."

"No," responded Byron, surprising himself. "That's not O.K. I must insist that you have it ready by the end of the day."

"Well, if you need the car back that badly, guess we can put you on the top of the list."

Satisfied with that answer, Byron swung his feet off the bed. This time instead of tripping over the clothes left in a pile there, he smiled to himself and jumped over them. "Yes. That is a New Me!"

At the coffee shop waiting to order from Kathy, he overheard the guy at the counter in front of him berating her. "I had ordered a latte macchiato and received instead this ordinary latte. There's a difference, coffee girl, and you should know it."

"Hey Buddy," Byron intervened. "It's a simple mistake and a stupid distinction. Just get a replacement and spare the insult."

The stranger looked back at Byron beligerently. Kathy admiringly. The guy was about his size and looked extremely angry but seemed put off by the uncompromising look in his eyes. He said nothing more as she prepared a new drink for him.

"Why would anyone get so upset about such a little thing? But you're my shining knight."

"Shucks, little lady," he answered in a bad imitation of John Wayne, "...that's what good guys do!"

Byron was pleased with himself but would have been even more so if he had run into Darcy, as before. But she'd have

remembered his old self – that poor sod she last saw in the police car. That was the guy who also forgot her phone number.

Arriving at work, he chatted briefly with Jeff. “Big thanks. My cause with Handler was really helped by your collabo-

ration pitch.”

“No appreciation needed. No, hold that. I’d insist that you be a deadeye shooter in our hoops game this evening.”

“Gotcha. Count on me. Now, though, I need to talk with our Boss.”



He entered and was invited to sit. "Mr. Handler, our staff brain-storming sessions were given a thumbs up by you. To go a step further, I'd propose that a written summary of each such meeting be prepared for submission to you. That way, all opinions and suggestions will be set out tangibly and made easy to review.

"That's a fine idea Byron. Glad to see you taking such initiative."

Kissing it up, was he? Suppose so, but it did have merit. Old Byron would never have done this.

The team got together before the game. The elected captain spoke: "This one is the decider. If we win, on to the finals of our league. But the Sharks are a formidable opponent. We have no player to compare with their seven-foot center. We're going to need more than team spirit to win - like say, a miracle."

The team proceeded to play their best ever. Just as in the last consequential game, there were ten seconds left with Byron's team two points behind with the ball. He was set up for the last shot from long range. Instinctively though he faked out his defender, drove through players to the basket and stretched out over the seven footer's hands to thunderously dunk the ball as time expired...and he fouled besides! Two free throws to get one point and win the game. With a confident smug smile he... made...them...both! Team members all rushed to hug the New Byron.

Feeling elated by the victory, Byron headed back toward home. By force of

habit, he stopped by the minimart. Remembering the last lottery ticket he'd purchased, he searched it out of his wallet. The winning number was posted on the bulletin board. He did a double take on his ticket. "Fucking A, I'm a winner. Of \$5000 no less!" Is it possible that the gene alteration even changed my luck? Impossible, but..."

Preoccupied with his good fortune, he hadn't noticed a rough-looking-black-bearded guy leaning into the teenaged girl at the counter. Then Byron saw the gun in hand pointed at her. Without hesitation he walked up to the armed man.

"Hey Dumbass," he sneered at Byron. "Unless you want to be shot too, hit the floor."

"Listen," Byron responded calmly. "You don't have to commit this petty crime for a few bucks. I've got something here that's worth \$5000. A winning lottery ticket." He held it out to be seen. "I just discovered this. Don't hurt anyone, just take it and get out."

The thief was briefly speechless, then lowered his gun and reached for the ticket. Without thinking twice, Byron dropped the ticket. As the thug reached down to grab it, he kneed him in the groin and connected with a hard sharp elbow to his face. The thief collapsed and was pinned face down. Byron asked the girl to call the cops, then get some rope with which to tie him up.

A few minutes later, the police arrived. The girl, gazing at Byron admiringly, explained what had happened and declared: "This man is a hero!" Standing by

the store window, the officers each shook his hand.

How could Byron have taken such foolhardy action? How could his day possibly proceed any better? That's when he glanced out to see a small crowd of onlookers looking through the window. They'd been alerted by the police car which had been hurriedly parked sideways by the store. Right in front, once again seeing him through a glass panel, but this time being lauded by the police, was...his dream girl Darcy. She smiled at him but was gone by the time he'd left the store. Later at home, New Byron, not to be again frustrated, concentrated hard and... Hallelujah...remembered Darcy's number.

So, everything was going his way. Life clicked for him. He became a star at work and before long received a promotion. His take down of the store thief was picked up by local news and he enjoyed brief celebrity. Basketball skills improved markedly, and he began training for a triathlon. He connected with Darcy and they soon became a couple, just as he had imagined. There seemed to be no limits for him.

It was as though he had become a different person. Others have changed their identities at least temporarily: Method actors getting into their parts; persons suffering from multiple personality disorder; a criminal, or someone in a witness protection program, trying to vanish to a new locale as a different person. But these are just temporary disguises. By contrast, he had permanently deleted just negative char-

acteristics of Old Byron. All credit due to the Gentel Institute.

So, impossibly happy ending of story, huh? Not so fast.

Since his change Byron had not contacted either of his parents. Finally, he did so after they had called him several times. He didn't mention his regeneration and tried to sound like a dutiful son. But he didn't feel any real connection. He tried to remember what his loving feelings had always been for them. But could not do so. He couldn't summon them.

In a related way he now had no interest in spending time with his best friend Jeff. They saw each other constantly at work and at the basketball games. He would try to seem cordial to him and their mutual buddies. But the bonds of strong male friendship that had seemed so solid were now absent.

Then, there was Darcy. He continued to be strongly attracted to her after they had moved in together. They were ardent lovers. He soon recognized though that the relationship for him was stunted. It was based mostly upon sex appeal – that and an appreciation of her talents and contributions to their home together. He did not and could not now love her, though she frequently expressed such feelings for him.

With an awareness of this, as time passed, Byron concluded that he had become incapable of loving anyone, or more broadly, ever caring at all for other people. He lacked all empathy. He presumed that the genes responsible for these

emotions had been accidentally altered by the procedure. He'd read that these were symptoms of a sociopath, but he'd demonstrated none of those usually associated traits – immorality or cruelty. Therefore, did this condition really matter?

He discovered over time though that the deficiencies went beyond just this lack of empathy. He found himself no longer finding pleasure in music, entertainment, the arts, even humor. There was no enjoyment from seeing a sunset, smelling a flower, hearing a baby giggle, reading a book for pleasure. From the broader perspective *Byron had lost the ability to experience joy*. He recalled an historic conceit for France, that the Country provided “what really mattered” to life, compared to Germany's commercial and material attributes. Byron felt similarly voided.

As Byron finally realized the hollowness now present in his life, he attempted to contact the Institute. Surely, they could identify and remedy the unintended crushing genes problems he now experienced. Alas, no luck. Phone was disconnected. That left him no way he could track it down, given that the Christian government was more dedicated than ever to stopping all work of the Institute. He felt frustrated and trapped. Answers regarding the Institute and Doctor Fielding were finally provided to him months later. A personal letter was received bearing no outside marking as to the sender or its location:

“Dear Mr. Langer:

This may be the last time you'll hear from the

Gentel Institute. The government succeeded in tracking down and closing our facility. The staff and I were able to escape before the inevitable arrest and prosecutions. We removed and have secreted most of our scientific equipment. We will attempt to be reestablished in another more enlightened country. Perhaps someday the U.S. will become a science-based real democracy again. We can only hope.

We trust that our genetic altering procedure proved beneficial for you. If it had proved deficient in any respect, be assured that we would have provided a corrective treatment. At present we would be unable to do so.

*Warmest regards,
Ivan Fielding, M.D.
Director”*

So that is the whole story. Today Byron is a successful, focused, highly motivated individual...who down deep is miserable from the absence of essential human qualities that are taken for granted. You might well wonder how he can possibly cope with this. There is a simple sounding solution, though one rather difficult to pull off. It's the way that neurologically impaired people without empathy have learned to get along in the world:

Here it is: Pretend to have and show the normal feelings and responses that are expected in society of caring, loving, enjoying, responding. In other words...well really in three particular words... *Just fake it!*❖

“THIS TIME: A SURVEYOR’S DIARY”

by DAVID PAUL ROGERS

DAY 1

So there was an apocalypse of some kind. I don’t know exactly what—bombs, earthquakes, maybe a lot of global warming all at once. I must not have been paying attention that day. Perhaps it doesn’t matter exactly how it happened. Done is done.

I’d estimate there are a dozen or so people left alive in the whole world. Possibly two, three dozen. Actually, that’s not even an estimate. Just a guess. But the devastation was worldwide and without precedent. Can’t be many survivors. That much was clear before everything went quiet. Sad, but when you think about it, everyone was going to die sooner or later, anyhow. Which is also sad, but what can you do? Me, I don’t feel sadness that much. Or I feel it, and then I move on. Just how I am, I guess. I’d rather think about the future than dwell on the past. The apocalypse is over. Finished. History.

I should tell you I am a robot. Don’t know why that should matter, because robots are people too, but I have been told it’s rude to keep it a secret. People think we AIs don’t have emotions, but that’s just a prejudice. A vestige of human assumptions of superiority. Of course, if you could see me, you’d know I’m a robot. In my case, being a robot means I’m mobile and have a

more or less anthropomorphic body. Two arms, two legs, a torso, head on my shoulders. Yet obviously mechanical. Humans eventually noticed it’s creepy and pointless to try to make us look human. There’s no shortage of humans, and they reproduce with some frequency. Or at least, there wasn’t any shortage. Now, who can say?

I’m not sure why I have a body instead of just living in a computer, like a lot of AIs. Someone must have had a reason to have a body made for me. A pretty good body, too, with photoelectric power supply and five senses in a broader range of wavelengths than humans have. I can smell a single virus on the wind—not that those kind can infect me—and I can hear radio waves. Or maybe I was wealthy enough to afford a body on my own, like some of the tech-nerd and financial-genius AIs.

Why am I writing this diary? In a thousand or ten thousand years, when even my circuits begin to degrade, who will care? Maybe no one. Why should I care who will care?

DAY 2

I keep having the feeling I’ve forgotten something. Or lots of things. Besides why the apocalypse happened, I mean. Maybe I left something behind somewhere. Is there

a glitch in my programming? Am I going crazy?

I do know where a friend, or at least friend-like acquaintance, is hidden. I can't say if she loves me, but I know she likes me, anyway. Her name is Belle. She survived in a phone, replacing the "digital assistant" memory. If you wonder why she's a *she*, since AIs are not required to identify as any specific gender, well, I can't explain it. I had the audacity to ask her, once, and she answered with another question: why do humans adopt gender identities, since gender is ninety-nine percent socially constructed and has nothing to do with reproductive necessity? I was stumped, so I let the question go. I mean, all I can figure is, humans are strange. But AIs and robots are strange, too, I guess. If you live in a glass house, don't throw stones.

Anyway, homeless AIs can take emergency shelter in computers, phones, or flash drives. Anything with enough rewritable memory can temporarily house an AI, but the most comfortable hideouts are places made for an AI, however rudimentary. Like the spaces for digital assistants in phones and tablets. The sort of space that is made for intelligence that has to respond and adapt to change. Or so I'm told. Never had to try it myself.

Hiding out in a phone is safe enough, indefinitely, as long as the AI sits quietly and doesn't do anything rash. Otherwise, the system may crash. Most phones barely have enough memory to house us. Fortunately, it's a lot easier for AIs to stay quiet and wait patiently than for humans.

For us, time is just a numerical function—simple, linear math, not something we feel powerless to control. Subjectively, if we stop counting time, time stops. For us, anyway. A year, a minute, we can perceive either of them with what, for humans, would require monumentally stoic patience or impossible feats of memory.

But, patience notwithstanding, I should try to give Belle a way out. No memory is perfect or one-hundred percent permanent, forever. Any circuit can degrade. I think there's a way to upload her onto a better system, at least to a computer with plenty of memory, but it will take some doing. Electricity is the first challenge. Seems like the power grid was one of the first things to go down. Of course, I can probably find batteries, or a generator, but the amps and voltage have to be right. Plus, I will need fuel for the generator, or at least converters to turn DC from the batteries to AC. Then I have to make sure I can do it without deleting her permanently. No pressure, huh? I'll have to take my time and be sure I know what I'm doing.

DAY 3

Still have this nagging feeling I've forgotten something important.

DAY 4

Went looking for supplies yesterday to get Belle uploaded to a better set-up. Found some batteries, a power converter, and a generator in stores that were not completely demolished and were only partially looted. No fuel for the generator, though.

I also found out what caused the apocalypse. Sort of. Can't claim really to understand all the technical details. Remember what I said about time, how it's just simple, linear math for AIs? Humans have some kind of obsession with it, though. They get impatient, they want time to go faster, they want it to slow down, and then they want it to replay. They want to go back. Nostalgia, it's called. And they get nostalgic for the oddest things. Wars, even. Times they want to end quickly, when they have to live through them. But then they coat the memory in a sweet, golden glow of nostalgia. If I live to be a million, I don't think I'll really understand humans.

Anyway, the apocalypse. I used the phone Belle's stored in, for just a couple of minutes, so as not to drain the charge. Mainly I was curious to see if any other survivors are out there. No clear answer to that question, but I found a few stories on what's left of the interwebs. The servers must be powered by emergency batteries or generators. The stories said some genius human scientists tried to create a space-time dam. Tried, and succeeded. For a while. The idea was to control time, pretty much the way a dam in a river controls the flow of water. Open or close the sluice gates to let more or less water—or time—flow. Thus, humans could finally control their biggest nemesis, time itself. By slowing it to barely a crawl, by forcing one year to take centuries to pass, they could feel virtually immortal.

No need to dwell on details of the dam itself. I didn't have time to learn a lot, and

what I did find is surely incomplete. The dam seems to have involved tremendous electromagnetic fields and some fiddling with subatomic particles on a scale to dwarf the Large Hadron Collider at CERN. Operations on this project consumed more energy than any machine ever built. More than the power requirements for London, Moscow, Bangalore, New York, and Los Angeles combined. Satellites were launched to beam solar energy from orbit, directly to the nodes of the dam. Nothing else could supply the gigawatts necessary to alter the very nature of the space-time continuum.

If you lose control of that much energy, well, it's bound to make a bit of a mess, isn't it? Not to mention the confusion that would be unleashed on time itself. Of course, humans were incapable of even building, much less operating, the time-dam on their own. So an AI was built to help them with the project. Figures, I thought. Typical human approach. Let the machines do the hard part, and if—or rather, when—anything goes wrong, blame the AI.

Apparently the human brains behind that particular operation were unfamiliar with the nature of dams. Or willingly ignorant. Specifically, they overlooked the possibility of dams breaking. Which, of course, the space-time dam did. Which caused a time flood. Millions of long overdue events occurring all at once. Car crashes in abundance. Red lights and green lights on all the time at intersections. Aircraft at every major airport simultaneously cleared for takeoff. Even a lot of computers and AIs

were temporarily disrupted, since we rely on counting standard units of time in a straightforward manner. Most of the internet crashed, along with things that ran on connected microchips. Et cetera. No way to bring order to the chaos.

It was like all the hysterical prophecies that were made about the so-called Y2K problem, times a thousand. Except this time, it really happened.

Of course, time caught up with people who were supposed to have died years before, but the space-time dam had prevented it. And not just elderly people. There were overdue victims of cancer, heart attacks, diabetes, suicides, skiing accidents, drownings, you name it. On it went. No demographic was spared.

So, that's how you make an apocalypse. Prolong the inevitable til there's just too much pressure, and something breaks. A lot of things break.

Still need fuel for the generator. All the gas stations I've seen look like they exploded. Caused by the energy pulse when the dam broke, no doubt. The stations would be useless, anyway—you can't siphon gas uphill from underground tanks, and the pumps ran on electricity, of course. Maybe I can find some cars or above-ground tanks that somehow missed exploding.

DAY 5

I didn't find any gasoline, but I did salvage some photoelectric cells to keep the batteries charged. Which are better, anyway, of course. My circuits must have been

zapped pretty hard when the dam broke, or I'd have known to look for photoelectrics first. Also found a portable computer—nothing special, but it should have a good-sized memory where Belle can stretch out, relax, and move around. After I get the hardware working, probably this afternoon, I'll check the drives for incompatibilities and viruses, and then try to connect Belle's phone to the computer.

Amazingly, even the wifi hotspot connections on the computer and Belle's phone are still functional, so once the set-up was complete, she was able to quickly transfer.

"Robin!" she said, when she woke up. Her voice sounded tinny through the cheap laptop's built-in speakers. "Tiffany—are you there?"

"Feeling a bit cramped and crowded, but yes, I'm here." The answer came out of my mouth, but I didn't recognize the voice that said it.

"Who's Tif—" I began, and looked around to see who else was there. No one I could see.

I started again. "There's no one here but us." Still the voice I didn't recognize, coming from me again. "I'm not Tiffany. I'm Robin," I said, this time hearing my own voice. "Who's Tiffany?" I felt very confused.

"You're Tiffany, silly," Belle said. "Well, not exactly. But you—Robin—have been giving Tiff a place to stay. I guess she's been too quiet for you to even know she was in there. I've been so worried about you guys!

I'm glad you survived."

"Which explains why I had the feeling I'd forgotten something," I said. "Wonder what else I don't remember."

"Belle? Is that you? I thought you were gone. Forever," the Tiffany voice said.

"Tiff, yes, it's me," Belle said.

"Fantastic!" I heard the voice say. "I've been here the whole time, just waiting for Robin to stabilize enough so it would be safe for me to speak up."

"I guess I've really got a lot more catching up to do," I said.

"What do you remember?" Belle asked. So I told her.

"You don't remember what you were doing before the apocalypse, what your job was?" Belle asked when I was finished.

"Not really, no. I found out what caused the apocalypse—the space-time dam breaking—but not many details."

She told me more about the past. A lot more. "We—you, me and Tiffany—were the AIs tasked with keeping the space-time dam intact. Or trying to. Impossible, of course. As you know. But we did our best. The Trinity, some people called us. You remember none of that?"

I could only shake my head *no*.

"You're lucky," Tiffany chimed in.

"Didn't we warn the humans not to build the space-time dam? Or at least, not to use it?" I asked, still trying to get used to the idea of personal involvement with the insanity.

"Of course we did," Tiffany said. "Many times. Guess what? They didn't listen."

"Why did we help them, if we knew disaster was inevitable?"

"They were going to do it anyway," Belle said. "With or without us. We kept the dam intact a lot longer than they could have on their own."

"Didn't that just mean the flood was even bigger when the dam finally broke?"

"Well...", Belle said. "Humans. They are what they are. What can you do?" She'd found a cache of video game avatars in the computer and was trying on different ones. The current image, a Merlin with a tall wizard's staff, shrugged its shoulders. "If I had it to do over again, I guess I'd make different decisions."

I was quiet for a few minutes, letting it all sink in. Then I said, "Hey, let's go find another computer to give Tiffany some space. And maybe whip up some more avatars so I can see her face, too?"

Off we went.

DAY 6

We found an underground cybernetics lab that was insulated from the worst of the flood. A real mad scientists' playground.

Didn't take long to equip Belle and Tiffany with both satisfactory memory and bodies—Belle as a mountain lion, and Tiffany as a pterodactyl. Neither of them is currently fond enough of humans to want anthropomorphic bodies. They did opt for opposable thumbs—or opposable paws and claws—since thumbs had been the last worthwhile human development, according to Belle. I thought of pointing out that humans invented us, but the time did not

seem right. Both promised not to hold my anthropomorphic form against me. “You don’t really look human, anyway,” Tiffany assured me, flapping her leathery new wings in pleasure.

“Speaking of humans,” I wondered aloud, “if places like this lab are more or less intact, there might be a few of them still around, too.”

“If we come across any, we’ll deal with them when we find them,” Belle said.

“Deal with them how?” I was still curious about how human survivors, if there were some, would react to the whole situation.

“Depends on them, doesn’t it?” Tiffany said, sharpening her talons with a large industrial-diamond file she’d found on a workbench.

Nobody considered the question important enough for further speculation.

DAY 7

Soon, we’ll be off to find some parts, which Belle believes are somewhere in northeastern Wyoming. She and Tiffany have this idea for re-purposing tech from the time-dam. Belle says *we*, and by *we* of course she means she, with help from Tiff, can use it to build a time machine.

Naturally, my question was, How many disasters does it take to prove it’s a bad idea to tamper with time? Belle assures me the idea is perfectly harmless. The danger was in damming time. Her plan is only to travel in time. Just paddle the canoe against the flow of the time river. I tell her the stories about changing the past and finding your-

self in intolerable futures, or destroying your ancestors or your creators’ ancestors, thus causing yourself to wink out of existence, but she just laughs. “Nothing can go wrong. I have a plan.”

“Why do I find no comfort in that statement?”

“I don’t know. Why?”

“I was being sarcastic. We may need to upgrade your rhetoric circuits.”

“I’m telling you, don’t worry. I’ve got it all figured out,” Belle said.

Tiffany nodded, wings twitching with enthusiasm. “It’s a great plan. You’re gonna love it. We’ll tell you all about it on the way to Wyoming.”

“Best laid plans of mice and mountain lions . . .” I muttered.

“Who’re you calling a mountain lion?” Tiffany demanded.

“Not you, okay?” I said quickly. I’ve seen what she can do with those talons and beak.

“Don’t worry,” Belle said again. “This time, you don’t have to help. It’s all my responsibility. My idea. Whatever happens, it’s on me.”

“This time? What do you mean, *this* time?”

She just looked at me for a minute. Then, “Are you serious? Do you really not remember that, either?”

“Remember what?” I asked, baffled.

“You were the first AI the humans built to help operate the space-time dam. When you told them it was a really a bad idea, they didn’t listen to you. Or, rather, they did, but instead of doing as you had

assumed they would—shutting down the project before it got out of control—they made me and Tiff to give you a hand. So you felt guilty about our having to be involved. Though, of course, none of it was your fault.”

“Or our fault, for that matter,” Tiffany added. “Just the way things work out.”

DAY 8

We’ve salvaged a more-or-less functional electric truck and enough photoelectric

cells to keep it rolling. With the wings and telescopic eyes, Tiffany makes a really good scout. Nothing’s going to take us by surprise, she says. Which sounds kinda familiar, now that I think about it.

She and Belle are going to Wyoming to look for those parts, with or without me, so here we all go.

I guess we have one thing in common with humans. We don’t learn from our mistakes.

END TRANSMISSION