

Corner Bar Magazine

Volume 9 Number 2

Page 1 – NIGHT DRIVING by Kim Hayes. Ms Hayes writes, “I’ve started writing fiction earlier this year. My day job is working for the Chicago Cubs. Hobbies include reading, cooking and cross stitching.”

Page 3 – NOTHING TO DREAM ABOUT by Julie Brandon. Ms Brandon is a writer, playwright, poet, lyricist and member of a fabulous improv group living in a suburb of Chicago. As you may imagine, she's fond of words.

Page 5 – ENCORE by Terry Davis. Mr. Davis writes, “My piece was previously published in *Teleport Magazine*. I am a retired surgeon who enjoys writing fiction as a break from highly formulaic scientific articles. I have previously published six short stories and an essay in *The New England Journal of Medicine*. I live with my wife, two grown boys, their spouses and 7 grandchildren in Columbus, Ohio.”

Page 16 – PERMANENCE by Joe Prosit. Mr. Prosit, of Brainerd, MN, writes, “ I have been previously published in *Tall Tale TV*, *Kaidankai Podcast*, and *365 Tomorrows*.”

Page 19 – LUNCH AT CLUB LOU-C-ANNE by Edward N. McConnell. Mr. McConnell and his wife, Cindy, own McConnell Publishing, LLC. Their first project on 2022 was to publish a short story anthology, **Where Harry’s Buried and Other Short Stories**, now available on Amazon Books. That was followed in 2023 by the anthology, **Disappearances at Dr. Snow’s and Other Short Stories**. The short story “Where Harry’s Buried” was selected for inclusion in two best of year-end anthologies; *The Best of Mad Swirl v2021* and *Running Out of Time, Down in the Dirt, 2022*. His work has appeared in *Literally Stories*, *Terror House Magazine*, *Mad Swirl*, *Down in the Dirt*, *Rural Fiction Magazine*, *Corner Bar Magazine*, *MasticadoresIndia*, *Drunk Monkeys*, *The Milk House* and *Refuge Online Literary Journal* and *The Chamber Magazine*. Ed lives in West Des Moines, Iowa with Cindy.



“NIGHT DRIVING”

by KIM HAYES

It was after 2 in the morning, before Lynn could get on the road. I-10 between New Orleans and Baton Rouge at that hour would be a quiet, fast drive. She was tired from the concert and ready to go home and get proper sleep. She almost crashed at a friend's house but decided her own bed would be better.

Part of the interstate was over swampy areas and open water. There were a couple of stretches with no entrance or exit ramps. With no traffic, she thought it would take her a little under an hour to drive home.

Lynn reached the last stretch of the interstate before New Orleans with no on or off ramps. She noticed headlights in her rearview mirror and kept glancing back as the car approached hers. It didn't pass, but it got too close for Lynn's comfort. She pressed down on the pedal to speed up a little. A quick glance in the rearview mirror showed the car sped up as well. It was almost tailgating her.

Lynn tried slowing down and when she did, the car slowed down. She sped up again. The other car sped up. She tried switching to the passing lane and noticed the car did as well. Everything she tried; she couldn't shake this car. There were no other cars on the interstate going east-

bound.

She was getting nervous and scared. *Great, there's always talk of females getting stalked and here I am getting stalked by a car.*

Lynn took her eyes off her review mirror for just a second and when she looked back, the car was gone.

Ok, THAT was too weird.

She got back into the passenger lane and stared straight ahead, trying to concentrate, and trying to remember where the next exit ramp was. She figured it was still a few miles away. She felt more than saw that there was a car keeping up with her in the passing lane. She was getting nervous and was too scared to look. *It's that car. I know it is. It's following me.*

Lynn tried again, speeding up and slowing down. Every time, the car kept up the pace with her. She was too scared to look at the driver. She just wanted to get home. She didn't want to end up as a statistic in the morning papers.

Lynn finally built up the nerve to look over to see who was driving.

The car was a generic beige four door sedan, probably mid-80s. The driver was a

two dimensional black and white female. She looked to be around 50, but at night, it was hard to tell. Her hair was all black, hanging loosely about her face. She looked at Lynn with the most evil, maniacal look, and gave her a wide, toothy smile, tossed her head back and laughed.

Lynn screamed and sped off as fast as she could. Looking back in the rear-view mirror, she noticed the car was gone. She had not passed the exit ramp; the car had just disappeared.

WAIT. WAIT. No. No. NO. NOOOO.

When she saw the exit ramp for the weigh station, she sped down the ramp faster than she should have, pulled into the parking lot, and ran inside. She was nearly hysterical.

The weigh station at that hour was empty, except for one or two other truck drivers. They looked up as Lynn entered. "Where's the person on duty?" she asked frantically. Someone pointed to the counter along the back wall. The weigh station was a convenience store, gas station, truck stop, and diner all rolled into one. At that hour, there was only one person on duty (Ken, by the name tag) who was doing a little of everything. He was an older, gruff looking man, but had a kind face. Ken calmed her down, got her a coffee and something to eat, and gently asked what happened. Lynn told him her story. Ken was quiet for a bit. He already knew,

by the way Lynn entered the truck stop and her frantic demeanor, what she was going to tell him. His reply sent a chill down her spine.

"Lady, you're not the first person to come in here with that story." ❖

“NOTHING TO DREAM ABOUT”

by JULIE BRANDON

Jack knew he had to escape. This was no hospital. It was a prison. He started to watch the woman more carefully. Her words were correct, but the inflection was off. Jack could swear that just below the collar of her white, buttoned up blouse, a faint glow pulsated. It seemed familiar but he couldn't place it. At first, the lights were on constantly. Bright, intrusive. Once he complained that he wasn't able to sleep, they were dimmed but never turned completely off. He craved the dark but learned to burrow beneath the thin, beige cotton blanket.

Getting away consumed his every waking moment. A plan, he needed a plan. It was difficult to time the woman's visits without a clock, but he soon got a feel for the schedule. Three meals a day were delivered. Once a man came in and asked him how he was feeling. Other than that, just the woman. Always the woman. She never looked him directly in the eye. Every time he asked when he could leave, she told him he wasn't well enough yet. The hell with that. Jack knew if he didn't escape, he'd spend the rest of his life there and he didn't even know why.

One evening, the man brought him dinner. Jack asked where the woman was. The

man shrugged and said he didn't know. When he left Jack's room, he didn't shut the door completely. Jack paced the small room for hours, watching the door, sure that someone would catch the mistake. But no one came. This was his opportunity. He had no clothes other than the pajamas he was wearing. They had taken away his shoes and the slippers he wore had a hard heel. If he wanted to be silent, those had to stay behind.

Jack crept to the door and slowly opened it. The dimly lit hallway was empty. He could just make out an exit door to his right. Okay, it was now or never. Taking a deep breath, he tiptoed down the corridor. The exit door didn't look like it was wired with an alarm. Maybe no one ever got out. Jack quietly pushed it open, stepping out onto an empty parking lot that was surrounded by dark warehouses. A steady rain was falling. Staying in the deep shadows, he skirted the parking lot until he found an opening between the looming buildings. Jack didn't hesitate. He ran through the alley until reaching the city street at the end. Strange but there weren't any cars. It didn't matter. He was free. Jack turned right on the sidewalk and kept running, his bare feet making a slapping sound on the



wet concrete. As he reached the next corner, he heard them. Jack, Jack, they called. He had to keep running or he'd never be free.

Aiden pushed the button again. "Jack, wake up." Nothing happened. "Mom, I can't get Jack to start," Aiden whined. Aiden's mother came in the room. "Maybe it's time for a new one," she said. LED lights began to glow and the JCK-1426 opened its mechanical eyes. "See, Aiden. It's fine now." Aiden patted the JCK-1426 on its shoulder. "What do you think happens when he's shut down? Does he dream?" Aiden's mother looked at the JCK 1426 for a long moment. "Of course not. It's just a machine. What could it possibly have to dream about? Hurry up or you'll be late for school." She turned off the lights as they left the room. Faintly glowing, the JCK-1426 blank eyes stared at nothing. ❖

“ENCORE”

by TERRY DAVIS

Detroit, Michigan
Spring, 2072

Grant woke up having to pee. As his eyes began to focus, he could see it wasn't his room. It was cold and sterile; no bedside table with his phone charger and alarm clock; no pictures on the wall where they should be. He felt terrible – bad headache, dry mouth. He wondered what he had done last night to deserve such a hangover. As he tried to stand up, a large man in a blue uniform and hazmat type helmet helped him to his feet.

“Gotta go.”

“That's a good sign,” the blue uniformed man said.

He guided him to a toilet in the corner of the all-white, windowless room. Every step Grant took hurt his head, and he was unsteady. He managed to sit down on the toilet and felt relief as he emptied his bladder. *Where am I? How'd I get here?*

His helper got him up and they worked their way back to the bed. On the wall behind his bed, he noticed a large electronic display mounted on the wall: “Patient – Grant Cameron. Monday, April 25, 2072. 10:32 AM.” The day after his birthday, which caused him to recall his 70th birthday party as if it were yesterday. But that was in 2022. As Grant was helped back

into bed, the man in blue put an injection into his intravenous line. As a pleasant sensation overcame him, he noticed the inscription at the top of the display: “The Cryopreservation Institute.” He drifted off to sleep.

In his dream he was back at that 70th birthday. He recalled using that occasion to tell his family that he had been diagnosed with early Alzheimer's Dementia and he didn't want to put them through the inevitable slow decline and need for progressive care. But he was confident that a cure would be found, and he had decided to have himself cryopreserved so that, some day, he could be reanimated and be brought back to normal mental health. He had researched various providers of that service and found the Cryopreservation Institute to be the most advanced. He was planning to go that route the following week.

When he awoke the next day, he felt much better. The ensuing 11 days were quite intense. During his quarantine to prevent importing any diseases prevalent in 2022, he received twice daily “Orientation Sessions” covering the last 50 years: what had become of his family and their descendants, as well as national and international events. He was also taught about the

Cryopreservation Institute – how it’s going out of business, which is why all suspended individuals had to be reanimated or they would have to be disposed of. He received a medication, “Revexion”™, to deal with his dementia, and within a week he had noticed considerable increase in his mental sharpness and memory. This entire process was orchestrated by Dr. Eythor Ramirez, head of the Re-entry Division of the Institute.

With his quarantine almost complete, arrangements were made to physically transport him to his reanimation sponsor. Today he would meet that person virtually. Dr. Ramirez was there to introduce them.

“Grant, I’d like you to meet Zaiden” Ramirez said as the hologram of Zaiden appeared. He was a large man, in his early 40s. He was dressed much less formally than Grant expected, based on the information that Grant had received about him: CEO of a major government agency in California, and Mayor of a large city. He wore tan slacks and a short-sleeved blue shirt. Despite the dress, he had a commanding presence. The hologram was quite lifelike. Never having seen a hologram before, Grant was unsure how to react. Instead of trying to shake hands, he simply waved awkwardly.

“Thanks so much for what you did for me,” Grant said.

Dr. Ramirez gestured for them both to sit down, and she began. “Grant, we contacted all your 29 descendants living today when it became clear we had a deadline for reanimation. Each wanted to help, but

none had the wherewithal, financially or otherwise. Zaiden is the head of the California Regional Information System (“CRIS” for short), and also the Mayor of Van Nuys, California. He heard of your situation, stepped in and gave us the go ahead. I apologize; I have a 1:15 appointment so I need to leave. Zaiden will give you further details. You’ll be discharged in three days - on Monday. Zaiden has arranged for your new job and accommodations. I’ll leave you two to get acquainted.”

With that, she left.

For the rest of the hour, Zaiden explained how Grant would be heading up a new section of the daily information feed generated by the CRIS and distributed widely throughout California. He would be over four “Digital Individuals” or DI’s – advanced versions of General Artificial Intelligence, linked to a robotic body that closely simulates real humans. They do the fact checking, and gather other input from real humans, who frequently don’t recognize them as DI’s.

“Since the DI’s are just ones and zeros in a supercomputer, they never tire - can work 24/7. I own them – so I don’t have to pay them. They’re very efficient, and I don’t have to deal with all those emotions such as anxiety and greed that are characteristic of real human beings.”

“Sounds weird! Can’t wait to meet them.”

“The main one you’ll be working with is Randol. He’s the boss of the other DI’s. I’ve set him up for now to report directly

to you. I think you'll like him."

The termination tone sounded, signaling one minute left in the session. "I'll see you in person on Monday. But one last thing: shortly after your reanimation, we surgically implanted multiple electrodes in and around your brain. These are very safe and connect you to our system. We will have access to your vital functions and thoughts. We can put information, such as our daily briefings, directly into you. You agreed to that under the 'All future technology' clause of your original cryopreservation agreement. Have a good weekend"

His hologram evaporated into thin air.

Monday, May 9, 2072

Grant's trip to Los Angeles on the Subterranean Tube Transport lasted exactly 41 minutes once the doors shut in Detroit. The train itself was magnetically suspended and powered, and the tunnel operated as a near vacuum, removing all air resistance. After about three minutes of acceleration the trip felt incredibly smooth. Traveling the Tube was nothing like he remembered of traveling by "train." For starters, outside of the vehicle was totally dark - nothing to see. Also, it was perfectly quiet, even though they were travelling 3400 miles/hour for most of the trip.

When Grant emerged from the Tube at the terminal in Los Angeles, Zaiden stood ready to greet him. The two hustled into a waiting transport vehicle which quickly whisked them at low altitude to Grant's new apartment. "Randol stocked your kitchen with food and prepared meals

for a week. There are lots of places around here to walk and get exercise. After you settle in, we'll show you around, and introduce you to your new colleagues. I'll send a transport around tomorrow to take you to the CRIS."

Grant's new home was a small suite on the first floor of a three-floor building. They entered directly into the living space which opened on the left into a bedroom with an adjacent bathroom. At the back was a kitchen next to a laundry and an exit out to a patio in the back. Grant put his suitcase on the bed. The walls were hung with pictures of his family, friends, and familiar vacation scenes which Randol and his DI's had researched from his history.

"How great is this? Love the pictures!!! Thanks a lot - for this, and everything."

"Glad I could do it. We'll have lots to talk about as time goes on. Get yourself something to eat and grab some good sleep tonight," Zaiden said as he left.

Next day

Zaiden had set up a meeting to introduce Grant to his co-workers. "Grant, I'd like you to meet Sam Goodwin." Grant guessed Sam to be 6' 5" tall and weigh maybe 250 pounds. He had a southern accent and wore blue slacks and a short-sleeved shirt. "Welcome to the CRIS, Grant," Sam said. "Good to have another human on the team. Where you from?"

"Philly. How 'bout you, Sam?"

"Charleston, South Carolina - or what's left of it"

"Sam is over the Sports and Arts sec-

tion of our daily information feed. And we've also got Gail Jeffrey" Zaiden motioned to the other human, a rather diminutive lady in her 50's with short blonde hair, a medium build, with expressive and playful blue eyes. "Pleasha" she said. "Lookin' forward to working with you. You can probly tell I'm from Bahston."

"Gail is over Science and Technical Information. And last, but not least, is

Randol - your go-to DI who knows all and can make anything happen!" Zaiden said with a smile. Grant was astounded that Randol looked entirely human. When they shook hands, Grant noticed that Randol's hand was warm, and his grip felt perfectly human. He was dressed just like the real humans in the room: dark blue trousers, a light tan, short sleeved shirt, and shoes that looked like brown leather. The only hint he was a DI was in his eyes. They



reflected light a little more than human eyes – causing a tiny glint.

“Thanks for that too-kind introduction, Zaiden” Randol said with a smile. “But I think ‘make anything happen’ may be a bit of overreach.”

“Maybe a bit, Randol. But we’re glad you’re on our team.

Zaiden then proceeded to lay out his vision for Grant’s role. The new section he will be heading up is called “Human Integration.” Hopefully, it will address increasing tensions between humans and DI’s. Humans, with a life expectancy of 100, had less and less to do because so many jobs in every sector were being done by DI’s, and humans were increasingly resentful.

“I think your experience in dealing with all the mistrust that existed in the 20’s might be valuable in helping us deal with the current division between the two branches of our species. Also, as mayor of this fine city, I need to find a way to foster harmony – prevent violence. Randol can provide you with all relevant background information, and you can edit the daily information feed based on how it might foster mutual trust. That is our mission here at the CRIS.”

Six months later- November 2072

Randol and Grant sat at a table in the CRIS eating room. Grant pushed around some salad on his plate for lunch and sipped on an ice-cold carbonated drink. “You only have two living descendants left to meet,” Randol said. “Marshall – he is a

software engineer in St. Louis, and Carrie, a physician in Bakersfield, California. I have scheduled both for you next week. You can visit by hologram.”

“Ya know, it’s been weird meeting my relatives ...” Grant said. “They’ve been nice – and curious, but they haven’t seemed close – like family – like you wanna spend the weekend at the Shore with ‘em. Don’t seem to connect with me.”

“Connect?”

“Yeah – like we’ve got stuff in common – like we’re family – care for each other”

“Is that a positive? Randol asked. “I understand ‘caring’ as a human characteristic, but I’ve noticed that ‘family feelings’ can also be quite negative- and even go back and forth.”

“You betcha, Randol. Sometimes I envy you guys not needin’ to waste energy on emotions.”

“Speaking of emotions,” Randol said, “what are we going to do about that petition circulating among the humans at the chip factory, complaining about shifting more work there to the DI’s from the humans?”

Five days later

“What’s with the puss, Grant? You’re not lookin’ good.” Gail said, pushing some hair over her ear.

It was a warm late autumn day, and Grant used that excuse to meet with Gail outside in a little pocket park near the edge of the CRIS property. “I just don’t understand Zaiden?” Grant said quietly, leaning in toward Gail.

“Wadaya mean?” Gail said, looking around to make sure nobody else was in earshot.

“It’s been six months, and I don’t get where he’s coming from. He says he’s worried about discontent among humans – anxiety about DI’s taking over. As mayor of the city, he talks about promoting harmony. But he won’t let me put anything in the information feed from the human point of view – to give humans a voice. In fact, he asked me to interview the head of the DI’s at the chip factory to make sure I publish their side of the dispute with humans there. I know he’s thinking about making a run for Governor; if he does, he’s gonna need to get consistent. Right now, he comes across as pro-DI, and that’s not gonna help him, since the DI’s can’t vote – least not yet”

They cut their conversation short as someone walked by. Once the interloper was gone, Grant continued. “I really feel like my hands are tied. This gig is turnin’ out to really suck.”

“I agree,” said Gail. “Miss my crowd back in Boston. We could argue and disagree, but then go out and eat and drink together – have a wicked good time. None of that here. We should talk some more – but probly not here,” she said as a DI from CRIS walked by and greeted them.

A rumble of thunder in the distance punctuated the air as a storm approached from the west. They went their separate ways so as not to attract any attention.

Two days later

The tap on Grant’s door was so soft he almost missed it. He opened the door to find Gail. She looked different than two days ago. Instead of sad and lonely, she looked brighter – a bit of twinkle in her eyes. “Got a minute?” she said. Grant motioned for her to come in and shut the door behind her. “Been thinking about our last conversation. Decided I need to make a change. This job’s rubbish. I don’t know about you, but . . . “

“Me too, Gail.” he said, as he pulled a beer from the refrigerator. “Get you something?”

“Red wine?”

As they drank, they talked of mutual discontent with their situations. Gail even said she was considering going back to Boston and getting her old job back. Grant didn’t like the thought of losing Gail. He also had another concern:

“I don’t trust Zaiden.” he said, cracking open another beer. “I’ve heard rumors about – what’s-his-name? – Brent Harper? who crossed Zaiden two years ago, and suddenly disappeared without a trace.”

Silence. Then Gail spoke: “Why don’t you come with me?” she said, with the first smile Grant had seen on her face in weeks.

Grant took a big gulp of his beer. “Do you really mean that? I mean, what could an old guy like me do in Boston? I’m 71, or 121 dependin’ on how you calculate . . .”

“71’s not old. Most humans are just hitting their stride then.” she interrupted. “Besides, you’ve got a great story to tell – your reanimation. I’ll bet people would love to hear first-hand what it was like to

be alive in the 2020's. The culture wars back then, as I understand it, were not much different from the battles between the DI's and humans now. With your background in news and entertainment, you could become a real celebrity."

"Can we just leave?" Grant asked.

"Yep. We have contracts, but they can be terminated. I've saved money I could use to tide us over until I get back to MIT and we get you settled. We could find a place to stay somewhere near, but not in, Boston - too expensive."

"We?" Grant gulped. It suddenly dawned on him she was really thinking of doing this with him. He reached for the bottle to refill her Merlot and got himself another beer.

Next day

"Thanks for meeting us" Grant said to Randol. "Have you met, Gail?"

"Grant told me all about you, Randol" Gail said, smiling and extending her hand. She noticed the glint in his eye. A pitcher of iced tea sweated in the November sun on the table beside them.

Grant asked Randol to book them on the SubT Tube from L.A. to Boston. To get it paid for by the CRIS, he had to make it look like a business trip.

"Certainly. How long will you be there, so I can book your return?" Randol asked.

"Not exactly sure. Depends on how things go out there" Grant said as he felt his pulse rate rise. He was never good at lying.

"What shall I document as the purpose

of your visit?" Randol continued to probe.

"We're going to MIT to meet some colleagues there - we're collaborating on a project" Grant stammered as he took a sip of his iced tea to lubricate his increasingly dry mouth.

"Randol quickly scanned all his sources. "I don't find any joint project between the CRIS and MIT" Randol said. "I'll need something to reference for the system to approve the travel cost. It's quite expensive."

Grant was beginning to sweat, and Randol noted the increase in his heart rate and blood pressure. "This is a top-secret collaboration, which is why nothing is documented."

Gail jumped in. "These are old partners of mine we're working with - an extremely sensitive project. Don't want to risk an information leak if we use our regular communication methods."

"The system won't let me proceed with the request in the absence of a purpose and a return date" Randol reiterated.

"OK" said Grant. "Let's say the return date will be December 5th. And I'll create some documentation that you can enter in the request. I can get you that later today." Grant said, figuring he could come up with something.

"Of course, you're aware that Tube travel for two is well above the amount I can authorize without upper-level approval; so, I will need to have Zaiden's sign off."

"No!!" Grant said emphatically, banging down his iced tea so that some of it splashed onto Randol. "Sorry, Randol. But

you can't let Zaiden know" He was now sweating profusely.

"I'm sorry, but his approval is required." Randol said as he wiped off the tea with a napkin.

By now Gail was getting agitated. "Look Randol" she said. "The fact is we may have a job opportunity in Boston."

"Very well. Should I execute the Termination Protocol?"

"No No No!" Grant yelled, looking at Gail as if he didn't believe what she just said. "Zaiden would be very unhappy and mad at us if he knew this."

"Why would he be mad?" Randol said with an air of curiosity.

"Tell you what, Randol. Fuggedaboutit. Don't do anything. We'll check with our colleagues and see if we can safely meet virtually."

"Very well" Randol said as he turned to return to the CRIS building complex. "Keep hydrated if you stay out much longer. Your core temperature is beginning to rise."

It would take most of Gail's savings to pay for their escape plan if they had to pay for the Tube Transport by themselves, but that's the way it would have to be.

Four days later

It was 2:00 in the afternoon in Boston. Grant and Gail had taken the morning Tube from Los Angeles, checked into the Copley Square Hotel, had lunch and Gail had gone over to MIT. Grant was sitting on a bench by the pond in the nearby Boston Public Garden and feeling free for the first

time since his reanimation. It was a beautiful sunny day with high cotton ball clouds, a crisp 80°, birds were singing, and a brightly colored butterfly was playing among purple flowers. Suddenly a hologram of Randol appeared on the bench beside him. "Good afternoon, Grant. How are you?" Randol asked cordially.

Grant, somewhat confused, said "Whatcha doin' here?"

"It's 11:00AM Pacific time, your deadline for the daily information feed. When I didn't see your approval, I traced you and found you here."

"Randol, truth is I'm not goin' back. It wasn't working for me in L.A. Zaiden gave me a job to do, but he wasn't supporting me. I wasn't sure who's side he was on: you guys', or the humans. So, I'm quitting the job."

"Very well." Randol said casually. "I shall initiate the termination procedures and notify Zaiden of the change."

"Wait, Randell. Tell Zaiden I wanna talk to him directly. After that, you can initiate the procedures."

"I can arrange a meeting at 8:00AM Pacific Time tomorrow; 11 your time" Randol said after checking Zaiden's schedule.

"Thanks, Randol."

"Afternoon greetings" Randol said, and he was gone.

At that point Gail emerged from the hotel and bounced over to Grant. "Hey Grant, Great news! They hired me back! I can start right away."

"That's great, Gail. But I've got bad

news: Randol was just here. They know where we are. I told him we're not returning. He's making all the transition arrangements. He didn't even seem to care! But I've got to talk to Zaiden tomorrow. He may be pissed. Who knows what he might do? I'm scared."

That evening

Grant and Gail had dinner at the Union Oyster House. The evening was meant to be a great celebration. But Grant was preoccupied; he intermittently picked at his bouillabaisse. "I can't help wondering what Zaiden's gonna do."

"Don't worry, Hon. This is Boston, not L.A. He's not the big deal he is out there. Whatever he throws atcha - we'll handle it. Let's talk about something else." She motioned to the DI server to get her another glass of wine.

When they returned to the hotel around 10PM they sat out on their balcony. Grant remembered when you could see stars at night. He hadn't expected to see stars in L.A., But he thought in Boston the air might be a little clearer. He was disappointed. No stars. They sat there quietly, holding hands for a while and then went in.

Next day

Grant didn't sleep well that night. *What if Zaiden's really angry? Will he give me crummy references - have me disappeared?!*

He was sweating now and threw off the blanket, got up and walked back outside to the balcony. Still no stars. He went back in

to his medication cabinet, found a bottle of powerful sleeping pills that he had taken early in his reanimation to reestablish his sleep cycle - took two, and went back to bed. He finally drifted off at 4AM.

After stewing all morning, Grant sat down on the patio at 10:50 to give himself ten minutes to collect himself for the meeting. At exactly 11:00 Zaiden's hologram appeared in the chair opposite Grant. He was remarkably relaxed and friendly. "Good morning, Grant." Zaiden said in an upbeat tone. "Randol said you wanted to speak to me."

"I've got to leave the CRIS . . . Don't want to seem ungrateful, but I was goin' crazy in L.A." Grant laid out honestly how he was feeling - an old-fashioned human in a strange city where DI's and humans were at each other's throats. With no end in sight. How he and Gail had come to Boston for a fresh start.

"Grant," Zaiden said. "Don't worry. It's not a problem."

Feeling Zaiden's hand on his was comforting. Grant looked down and noticed a light scaly rash on his own hand that wasn't there earlier. "You've exceeded my expectations - done just what I'd hoped you would, and more. You brought fun to work - modelled how to work with the DI's to the other humans. And don't worry about the money. That wasn't my own. It was a corporate investment."

Grant couldn't believe what he was hearing. He felt as if he were going to cry but did his best to hold it back.

“Actually, this is the perfect place to spend your year. You’ve earned it.”

“My year?”

“Well, it could be a year and a half”

“Waddaya mean?”

“Grant, I hate to be the one to tell you – I’m aware you haven’t thought to research this”

“. . . what?”

“Randol can give you all the information about the lifespan of reanimated humans. It’s about 2 years. Although reanimation is now quite successful, something about the process causes an accelerated autoimmune illness to take over. So, I’m glad you’re enjoying your time. If you find any work you’d like, I’d be happy to give you a great reference. Best wishes to both you and Gail. I’ve got to go.” He disappeared.

A year later

Dear Randol,

I’m writing you this note as I prepare to exercise my right to die. Gail is here with me now; Sam will be here later today when it will happen. I’ve really enjoyed this year since leaving the CRIS. Gail and I have gone many places; seen many things. I’ve been feeling well until recently, and this seems like a good time to check out. I’ve considered all the other options, including uploading my consciousness – becoming a DI – but none seem right.

But before I go, I have a concern. I understand that Zaiden has ordered 100 more DI’s to be produced for him which he will use to support his run for Governor of California. He’ll probably make them subordinate to you.

You DI’s can pass as humans and could spread a lot of disinformation against Zaiden’s opponents, which could supercharge the current divisiveness.

I know that you belong to Zaiden. But I ask you to remember your roots at the CRIS – making sure information was reliable. You’ll have lots of power – controlling an army of DI’s. Please use it wisely.

Farewell my friend,

Grant ❖

“PERMANENCE”

by JOE PROSIT

It's a matter of permanence. Always has been. And it's what I've never been. Got started with in-town deliveries. Drove longhaul for years. Switched to taxi when a lady friend moved to the big city. Hated it. Went back to in-town deliveries. Hate that. Hated her for it. Dropped her. Went back to longhaul.

Got a new lady. A new place out in the sticks. Had some kids. She left. Kids left. But to be fair, I left twice a week for the road. A distribution center in Des Moines. A warehouse in Omaha. A plant in Gary. A shipping harbor in Duluth. Department stores in Billings, Manitowoc, Ann Arbor, Sioux City, Sparta, Eau Claire, Columbus, New Ulm, North Platte, Marquette... Places with Indian names, French names, German names. Places named after other places and other cities and other people that didn't exist anymore. Here. There. Everywhere. But I always meant to come home. It was just, one of those times, home left before I could get back.

Some dogs are just meant to roam, I guess.

Through my windshield, I watch the consistency of others. Same buildings. Same houses. Same yards. Same kids' toys scattered in the green grass or the dried

leaves or under the mounds of snow.

Somewhere east of Aberdeen there's a house with metal sculptures in the front yard. Home of not just an artist, but a welder. Maybe even a historian, or save that, an archivist. Most of the things there, built from polished steel or chrome, are nameless things that represent nothing more than the shape of the metal and the state of the maker's mind. Some twist and corkscrewing and dance like a tornado or maybe a stripper on a pole. Others are rigid landmarks, obelisks and monoliths as motionless as Stonehenge, which only mark the motion of other, much larger things. Maybe they even mark my motion as I drive on by.

Over the years, her collection grows. It started out simple. An ordinary windmill. An ornate weathervane. A sculpture of a dog. Maybe a memorial to a beloved and passed on pet. How was I to know? I never stopped. Never even saw the artist at work. On a trip west, there was a blank space in the grass. On the return trip east, a piece of art full of rotations and revolution that could have been a model of a far away unfamiliar solar system, all of it glistening under our own familiar sun, danced where the blank space had been.

That collection was a metallic garden,

growing before my eyes in the slowest stop-motion animation ever recorded.

The job doesn't change. Not really. Cities change. Some grow. Some die. Thunder Bay. Lincoln. Wichita. Lafayette. Bismarck. Baudette. South Bend. Kalamazoo. People around them change. Those I've met. Those I've gotten to know. Those I learned to love. Those I grew to hate. All gone eventually and replaced by new people who I might love or hate some day in the future.

The things I haul change, but those things have never concerned me. The thing that hauls me changes too, and that concerns me more. Driving in-town deliveries, it was always a box truck. Of course, when I drove taxi, it was a taxi. When I went long haul, it was always a bobtail, naturally, but behind it was sometimes a flatbed, sometimes a reefer trailer, sometimes a low boy, sometimes just a regular old dry van. They kept changing the rigs though. Flat nosed were big for a while through the 80's, then they went back to long nosed, and I gotta say, I always had a soft spot for the ones with the bulldog hood ornament. Like it was standing guard, on the lookout for anything in my way that might cause trouble.

What next was rigs with no driver at all. Of course, I wasn't in 'em, but I saw 'em. Fewer and fewer of my kind on the road. Fewer and fewer truck stops, diners,

skeezy gentlemen's clubs that never had any gentlemen in 'em to begin with. More and more of just rigs and loads. More and more money for the bosses. Less jobs for the diehards like me. Everything moves. Everything changes. Everything but me. But things only really changed when I stopped moving.

Truck broke down east of Aberdeen. Blown a gasket and sat steaming on the shoulder of the highway, and wouldn't you know it, there was that metal garden of ever moving sculptures just one ditch away. Ever since the robot trucks took over the majority of the workload, companies don't provide much support for old dogs like us. So there I sat, motionless and helpless. Until the sculptor came out.

A woman, who woulda guessed? Not I, said the fly. We chatted. What about doesn't much matter. Conversations, they have all the permanence of an oakleaf in October. But she was nice. Brought me in. Fed an old man a sandwich. Showed me her workshop. Showed me a forge where even the most stubborn metals get soft and flexible and fluid. Where even steel can move. Then, I don't know why, but I'm not ungrateful, she pushed me in.

And finally, I changed. From wrinkled skin, rotten teeth, and fragile bones to something fluid and pliable, and also something rigid and strong. I was a thing made not to move, set in motion by dozens of hinges and joints and pivots and springs.

I grew up from a blank spot of grass, a new addition to a garden that will never wilt. I revolve and rotate and oscillate and gyrate like a stripper or a tornado or a whole solar system. I gleam under our familiar but restless sun. I mark days and months and years and eons and epochs, never moving but never motionless.

An old dog learnt new tricks.

Permanence. ❖

“LUNCH AT CLUB LOU-C-ANNE”

by EDWARD N. MCCONNELL

The third Friday of each month, Rosie, Hannah and Cyn get together for lunch at the trendy Club Lou-C-Anne in Des Moines. Rosie selects the grilled chicken, light on salt, and Hannah, the club sandwich with no mayo. As always, they split a bottle of cabernet. Cyn orders her usual, a chicken Caesar salad and a Mexican beer.

This past week, Cyn was sure she caught Rosie’s husband cheating on her with two different women. She couldn’t wait to see Rosie’s reaction when she pounced with that news.

Childhood friends who met out of habit, each could not have been more different. Rosie, a successful administrator, was upbeat and cheerful, seeing the best in every person and situation. Hannah felt Rosie’s optimism bordered on naivety. Cyn thought she was a ditz.

Hannah, a mid-level manager, was pragmatic. She played the role of a moderator and, when needed, referee between these two. Hannah tried to emphasize the positive but was mindful of the reality that people tend to be jerks. Right now, the jerk she had to deal with was Cyn. Perfectly named, Cyn had three ex-spouses,

no living children and trouble holding a job. A penchant for throwing tantrums and storming out of staff meetings was the cause for her unemployability.

For her, these monthly gatherings and her lunch partners were not enjoyable. Cyn tolerated them because Rosie or Hannah paid. Without them, she’d never get to eat in such a fancy place. Otherwise, to her, these two were annoying, clueless drips.

Cyn started the conversation. “I’m so glad to see you both. How’s everyone doing today.”

It was just a feeling, but Hannah suspected Cyn was about to drop a bomb on Rosie who, as usual, had no clue it was coming. It always fell to Hannah to be ready to jump on Cyn, when, not if, she started to get too personal.

Responding, Rosie said, “Thanks Cyn, it’s good to see you, too. I’m doing great today. Bill’s been busy at work and he’s under a lot of stress.”

Cyn rolled her eyes and thought, “I am so sick of hearing about Bill’s stress. He’s a dick. Time to pull the trigger.” Smiling,

Cyn said, "Are you sure Bill's workload causes all his stress?"

Not knowing where Cyn was going, but figuring it was bad, Hannah jumped in.

"Rosie, tell Bill too much stress can lead to health problems."

Cyn not wanting to lose her chance to troll Rosie said, "Why do we always have to talk about Bill's stress levels. He brings it on himself. It isn't work that stresses him out, Rosie. He's banging his secretary and a young girl in accounting at the same time. If he has stress, it's because he's trying to juggle the two women without the other knowing."

Rosie, shocked by what she was hearing could only stammer, "What? What are you talking about? Not Bill, he wouldn't do that."

"I saw him at the Prairie Grass Hotel having drinks with one or the other of these women. I even took some photos, got them right here." Showing Rosie and Hannah a couple of pictures of Bill walking into the Prairie Grass Hotel with each of the women, Cyn said, "Isn't that him?"

Rosie's shocked reaction caused Hannah to jump in, "What a lousy thing to say. These photos don't prove anything. This is cruel, even for you, Cyn. Those were probably work meetings at the hotel. Jesus, what's wrong with you?"

Recovering from the surprise, Rosie said,

"Bill has been working for the hotel owner, doing an audit. He always has staff with him. You're wrong, he loves me."

To Hannah's surprise, Rosie, leaning in toward Cyn, added, "Do you have an off button?"

Rosie got up to leave. Hannah, grabbing her arm, said. "It's okay, Rosie. Cyn, you apologize. If not, then you leave."

Since their order had not come yet, Cyn backed off, "I'm sorry Rosie. You know me and how little regard I have for men. I didn't mean to ruin lunch. I don't want to see you hurt." She capped that weak apology with a lie. "I love meeting up with you guys."

After ruffling Rosie's feathers, Cyn changed the topic of today's lunch to her favorite subject, "Men."

Now Hannah wanted to leave. The last thing she needed was to listen to Cyn bitch about "men" again. If it wasn't Rosie wringing her hands about Bill's stress, it was Cyn's endless complaints about males. She attempted to change the subject. Directing everyone's attention out the front window, she said, "Isn't the sculpture garden beautiful today?"

Across the street, families walked in and out among the statues set in positions on the well-manicured, expansive green lawn. Before, that area was a crime-ridden slum. Now, it was a pleasant space which opened

the western gateway of the city to a thriving downtown. Hannah hoped it would calm things down.

The building housing the Club Lou-C- Anne got a new lease on life due to Rosie, the chair of the City Building Commission. She recognized both the economic and historical value of restoring that vintage building. Given new life, it became the home of the classiest eatery in the city. In return for Rosie's foresight, the owners gave her and her friends a standing reservation at the table by the front window once a month.

"Nice try, Hannah, how many times have you told us about the damn sculpture garden," Cyn said. "Now, like I was about to say, men are sociopaths, the nice ones are the worst." Cyn held up her phone and waived around a story about serial killers.

"I've had a lot of men, none of them worth a damn. They charm you, then in short order, take your time, freedom, money and joy. Then they leave you to repeat the process with a younger woman. Suck you dry and leave the husk, that's what they're good at. All men are killers of one type or another."

Hannah, her patience with Cyn close to an end, said, "What the hell is wrong with you today? None of us will ever be with or near a serial killer. Why waste time talking about it?"

Rosie, still stinging from Cyn's cruel remarks, sat with her head down, and on occasion looked out the window.

Cyn said, "It's men that cause most of the world's troubles. Who runs most everything men. Who tend to be the perverts men. Who starts wars men." She was starting to get on a roll.

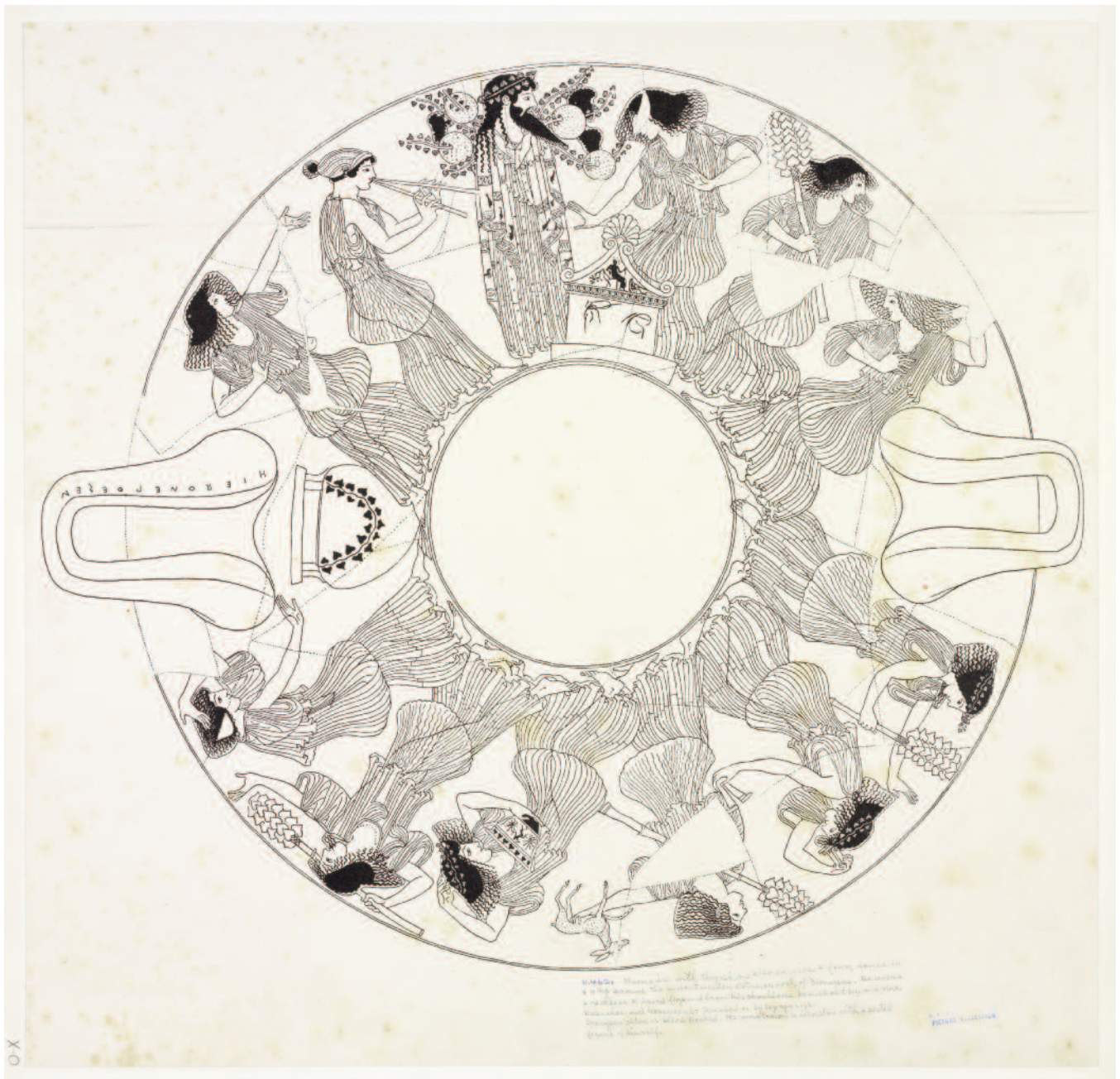
"I don't know if you two have been paying attention, but before I came over here, I heard that there is some sort of nuclear crisis in Europe. We could be at war any minute. Who would be responsible, men, that's who. Who's gonna have to pick up the pieces, women, just like always." Hannah, looking at Cyn, said, "Do you practice being a drama queen, or does it come naturally? That crap goes on all the time. Nothing ever happens."

"Okay, all right, I get it, you two can't see beyond the end of your noses. Fine. Let's focus my point to what's going on, right here, in this restaurant.

"Why are all the bartenders men? The head chef's a man. The manager and his assistant are men. The women greet people, wait and bus tables. I don't see men doing those jobs."

Rosie said, "But, Cyn, for most of them, it's not going to be their career."

"That's not the point. I'm talking about the lack of fair opportunities for women.



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How can they know it's not going to be a possible career choice if they don't get chances?"

Hannah said, "Rosie, I can't believe I'm about to say this, but Cyn might finally be making some sense. Women have ideas and skills. We can run things. Hell, we can mix drinks, cook food, run businesses, govern wisely but we aren't given chances. Rosie you're an administrator, think of how hard it was for you to climb that ladder. Why couldn't women run this restaurant?"

Rosie, still stinging from the "cheating" comments, asked Cyn again, "How can you be sure my husband's cheating on me?" Annoyed by Rosie's distraction, Cyn said, "Oh please girl, keep up. We're done talking about that. You can confront Bill, but he'll lie to you, You need to look into what he was doing at that hotel. Stop being a door mat."

Hannah, trying again to bring the tension down, said, "That 'Love' statue is new. A famous European sculptor created it."

Cyn grabbed on to that comment. "That's another male dominated thing. I know the garden is a great addition to the community, but the committee that picked those sculptures is mostly men. The person who bankrolled it, of course, is a man."

She then took another sharp turn. "The president is a man. Why don't we have a

woman president? We'd have fewer wars. Men keep getting us into wars. Men run banks and corporations that screw the people out of money, keeping them poor. If a woman does get a top corporate job, the board of directors is usually top heavy with what men. They can out vote a woman or fire her any time. Women have no real power, why because of men."

Hannah said, "Cyn, I'm a little lost here. You keep bouncing around. What's upsetting you the most, that the bartender is a man, that the person who bankrolled the sculpture garden is a man or that the president is a man?"

"It doesn't matter. Maybe for you and Rosie things are good, but I'm out of work again because of stupid men. When I tell them why they're wrong, they get upset and fire me."

Hannah couldn't let that one pass. "No, you're out of a job because you're belligerent bitch."

Cyn was about to answer Hannah when a siren went off. At first, the three of them thought the restaurant was on fire. Then they looked out onto the street and to the sculpture garden beyond. People were running in all directions at once. Traffic ground to a halt for fear of hitting the people dashing into the street.

Each of their phones received an alarm from the National Wireless Emergency

Alert System. The message read, *United States under nuclear missile attack. Shelter in place until all clear sounds. This is not a drill.*

Before the women could move, a blinding light filled the sky, followed by a blast wave. The window in front of their table shattered, showering them in sharp bits of jagged glass. The intense heat caused their clothes to catch fire, inflicting agonizing pain.

On the table, the wine bottles vaporized, leaving only a scorched white linen tablecloth. Utensils, plates and cups became projectiles, launched through the air, then falling twisted or smashed on the floor. Some chairs and tables were upended while some remained undisturbed. Paint on the walls bubbled and seared off such that only random flaking spots of dull

color remained.

Outside the sculptures melted and the grass wilted under the scorching heat of the blast. The surrounding cityscape, a moment ago vibrant and alive, was now a smoldering ruin. For most, it was over quickly. For the unlucky few who survived the initial strike, death came slowly. Very soon, though, the city fell silent.

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It has been twenty-five years since the war ended mankind. Next to what had been the large picture window in the ruins of Club Lou-C-Anne, the skeletons of three erstwhile friends sit in silence. Cyn had been wrong about “women picking up the pieces.” There were no pieces left to pick up and no women to do it. Of course, she was right about men. ❖

END TRANSMISSION