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ABOUT US



We publish new ideas and fresh perspectives, prioritizing the voices of typically marginalized communities to get to the root of the human experience. The name Radix comes from the Latin root of the word *radical*, meaning *to get to the root*.

Radix Media is a worker-owned and operated printer and independent publisher based in Brooklyn, New York. We're interested in telling the stories that often go untold and building a platform for marginalized voices. We have full ownership of our work and equipment, this means that we can take greater risks and share the stories that larger publishers might shy away from.

Radix Media was founded in Portland, Oregon in the fall of 2010 as a one-person shop with a single offset press. We printed tens of thousands of pages for the creative and social justice communities. We also dipped our toes into independent publishing, putting out zines, posters, greeting cards, and other ephemera that were designed and printed in-house. After a trek across the country in the summer of 2012, Radix settled in the Prospect Heights neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York.

In July 2017, we merged with Wasp Poster & Print, a specialty letterpress shop and design studio whose values and dedication to high quality printed matter overlapped with our own. This also greatly expanded our capabilities to include larger runs of traditional letterpress as well as foil stamping, die-cutting, embossing, and paper duplexing, which gave our clients more options for their projects

in addition to taking our publishing work to the next level.

That same year, we decided to focus our energy on expanding our publishing program, and put out an open call, which yielded nearly one thousand submissions. That project became our first book, *Aftermath: Explorations of Loss & Grief*.

As printers and designers, we feel that publishing is about the beautiful moment when thoughts, hopes, and dreams come together. It's about the freedom for people to tell their own stories. With our intimate knowledge of the printing process, we can turn a blank sheet of paper and some ink into a tool, a gift to be shared and passed down. In our new publishing venture, we're especially excited to use our skills as printers to make the books that we have always wanted to see. Because we have complete control of the process, we can make beautifully designed books while making sure that they stay economically accessible.

WORKER-OWNED PRINTER AND PUBLISHER LAUNCHES A SCIENCE FICTION CHAPBOOK SERIES

For Immediate Release

Contact: Sarah Lopez (sarah@radixmedia.org) or Lantz Arroyo (lantz@radixmedia.org)

(Brooklyn, NY—4/16/2019) Radix Media is pleased to announce **Futures: A Science Fiction Series**. The worker cooperative will release a new title each month between April 22, 2019 and October 2019. You'll find stories that explore critical contemporary issues in an imagined future—climate change, dystopian politics, animal uprisings, interpersonal relationships, reinvention of the self, and more. The series is available via subscription on their website.

Each story will be released as a chapbook—a saddle-stitched booklet with a letterpress printed cover and offset interiors, printed and bound in-house. Through this format, the reader will be immersed in each story individually. Radix Media believes that good science fiction reflects the dreams and nightmares of the present day. By exploring the issues contained in these stories, they hope that the reader gains a better understanding of our world today so that they can build the future they want to see.

The first story in the series is *Always Blue* by John Dermot Woods. *Always Blue* follows the personal struggles of a wind engineer who endures a set of tribulations rooted in his own invention. Schulz is an instructor of Wind Tuning at the City Academy, and the man who engineered the greatest work of his field: a Windwall that protects his island city from the increasingly volatile climate of the world around it. When he detects a draft crossing his campus and clouds appearing in the permanently clear sky, he suspects that his invention may be failing. Earth Day is the perfect release date for this classic example of climate fiction.

John Dermot Woods is a Brooklyn-based writer and cartoonist. His previous works include *The Baltimore Atrocities* (Coffee House Press) and *Activities* (Publishing Genius Press). John's work is known for its poetic verse and deep explorations of character. *Always Blue* is his first work of science fiction.

About Radix Media

Radix Media is a worker-owned printer and publisher based in Brooklyn, New York. After many years of doing business primarily as a commercial printer, the cooperative launched their publishing program in 2018. *Aftermath: Explorations of Loss & Grief* was released in April 2018, and is the Bronze winner for Anthologies in the **2018 Foreword INDIES Book of the Year Award**.





“Weird, intense, and intimate.”

Annalee Newitz, author of *The Future of*

Another Timeline and *Autonomous*

Genre: Fiction/Science Fiction

Size: 5x8

Format: Saddle-stitched

Publisher: Radix Media

Wholesale Orders: orders@radixmedia.org

An embattled wind engineer facing personal and climatic disaster. A society on the brink of collapse. Polar bear mutiny. And, of course, robots.

This box set collects the seven chapbooks from **Futures: A Science Fiction Series**, originally published as a monthly subscription. These beautifully illustrated chapbooks explore critical contemporary issues, inspiring us to rethink our future. The chapbooks are also available individually.

FEATURING

Always Blue by John Dermot Woods
ISBN: 978-0-9997137-3-0

Guava Summer by Vera Kurian
ISBN: 978-0-9997137-4-7

Muri by Ashley Shelby
ISBN: 978-0-9997137-5-4

Hard Mother, Spider Mother, Soft Mother
by Hal Y. Zhang
ISBN: 978-0-9997137-6-1

What You Call by Germ Lynn
ISBN: 978-0-9997137-7-8

A Point of Honor by Aeryn Rudel
ISBN: 978-0-9997137-8-5

Milo (01001101 01101001 01101100 01101111)
by Alexander Pyles
ISBN: 978-0-9997137-9-2

RADIXMEDIA.ORG/FUTURES



Q & A

Q: Futures is coming out as a series of chapbooks. Why publish each story individually and not in an anthology?

A: Reading a chapbook is a contained, intimate and immersive experience. Chapbooks are also thinner and lighter, the format is digestible. Once you're finished reading the story you can sit with it for a while and process it, instead of feeling pressure to move on to the next story.

Q: Science fiction and literary are two words that you don't often see together, what's the difference between science fiction and literary science fiction?

A: The stories that make up Futures are more than just plot-based thrillers. (Although many of them are quite thrilling!) They're a deep examination of character, something you typically find in literary novels. So we wanted to follow the stories of people in worlds and situations that are somehow different than ours.

Q: What kinds of stories will people find in Futures?

A: You'll find stories about climate change, dystopian politics, animal uprisings, interpersonal relationships, reinvention of the self, and more. The chapbooks really run the gamut in terms of subject matter. The first story is going to be *Always Blue*, and follows Schulz, an instructor of Wind Tuning in a city that has figured out how to control its climate.

Q: What do you hope people will get from Futures?

A: By exploring the issues contained in these stories, we hope that the reader gains a better understanding of our world today so that they can build the future they want to see.

Q: So far your publications have been "collections" of short stories. Do you think you're going to stick to this model?

A: We've used these "collections" as a way to grow our pool of authors and get familiar with the landscape since we're still so new to publishing. We're actually looking for a full length novel to pursue as our next project. So if you're an author, or know someone who's looking for a publisher, reach out! We're especially interested in publishing stories from underrepresented communities. We're open to both agented and unagented writers.

Q: What is the best way for people to follow the Futures series? Where can they buy the stories?

A: We post updates on our Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter accounts (@RadixMedia). People can also subscribe to our newsletter via our website or Facebook page. Futures is available as a subscription on our site and will be available as a box set later in the year.

WHAT PEOPLE ARE SAYING

Futures: A Science Fiction Series

"You don't want to miss the Futures series. Weird, intense, and intimate, these stories explore how tomorrow's technologies get under our skins (sometimes literally) and change our personal relationships. There is a sense of wonder here, but it's not for the march of industrial progress. It's for humanity, and our astonishing ability to find ever more scientifically advanced ways to love each other and screw each other over." —Annalee Newitz, author of *The Future of Another Timeline* and *Autonomous*

Always Blue by John Dermot Woods

"John Dermot Woods' eye discerns detail the rest of the world is blind to; his ear picks up frequencies that most of us can't hear. His deep reverence for and attention to the precise moment, exactly rendered, comes through in both his language and his drawings. I always feel slightly spellbound when I encounter Woods's work, like I'm somewhere both entirely familiar and entirely new. Part campus tale, part speculative fiction, *Always Blue* is funny and harrowing, a sustained, memorable glimpse into an ego—and a society—on the brink." —Kristen Iskandrian, author of *Motherest*

"Some say the world will end in fire, some say in ice, but Woods understands it's more likely to end in endless departmental meetings and endlessly-calibrated politeness. *Always Blue* is a cool-headed look at the future that none of us want but that we may well deserve. A subtle and satirical tale underlaid with an all-too-real grimness." —Brian Evenson, author of *Song for the Unraveling of the World*

Guava Summer by Vera Kurian

"Dropped into an authoritarian future, Vera Kurian's story swiftly had me identifying with the unnamed author and their struggles with hiding an illegal android, and navigating the liminal space between the "illegal" that is necessary for survival and the "illegal" that truly is sedition." —Josh MacPhee, member of Justseeds' Artist Cooperative and co-founder of Interference Archive

Muri by Ashley Shelby

"*Muri* is the rare story that perfectly encapsulates itself in metaphor and message. Suffused with dread, and hiding nothing of its consequences, Shelby still manages to pull the reader along, to lull them into the obvious lesson, only to reveal that the true moral is greater and more menacing than what has been imagined. Reading *Muri* is like being taught how to swim in the ocean, and to be fooled into thinking all you have to fear are the waves." —Eric Shonkwiler, author of *Above All Men*

"Using Herman Melville's *Benito Cereno* as backdrop, Shelby reimagines the classic tale of madness, isolation, and revolution for the modern age. With the detailed urgency that would appeal to readers of Margaret Atwood, Al-

WHAT PEOPLE ARE SAYING cont'd.

legra Hyde, or Jeff VanderMeer, Shelby's seminal work confronts head-on the myriad attitudes toward climate change and all the hope and despair at the very heart of 'the Impact,' tightly wrapped in brisk, energetic lyricism. Timely, accessible, and precise, this ticking timebomb of a story will wrack you from page one, and will leave you commandeering a line from the book to describe Shelby, herself: that she is the "Paul Revere of Impact," riding forward to warn you to wake the hell up before the lantern goes out." —Leah Angstman, editor-in-chief of Alternating Current Press and The Coil, and editor of *Undeniable: Writers Respond to Climate Change*

***Hard Mother, Spider Mother, Soft Mother* by Hal Y. Zhang**

"In this unexpected sci-fi tale, set in a not-too-futuristic surveillance state, Hal Y. Zhang renders Chinese mother-daughter relationships with tenderness and empathy. Come for the brain-eating fungal infections, stay for the insights on generational losses and memory." —Ling Ma, author of *Severance*

***What You Call* by germ lynn**

"*What You Call* is an empathetic exploration of what it means to care for another person, told from the outside of humanity looking in. germ lynn's writing is pithy and immediate, whether its form is a transmission from a cyborg or a conversation around a campfire." -- Tenacity Plys, Contributing Editor of *Queerly Reads*

"[N]o sleep or dreams. That's when the agents came." Low charge. One arm. Secret societies in the woods, and the constant threat of the agents. In *What You Call*, lynn shows a vision of humanity in a post-human world. This future is fast paced, told through urgent missives that blink like missed messages. But there are moments of ambient and lyrical observation that serve to slow down the protagonist's driven pace: amid the constant running and seeking to get a charge, one can find "iridescent shells of mussels", and "logs rearrang[ing] themselves...dancing ever upward toward the sky." *What You Call* is an analog to the soft politics of our time, covering what it means to be hunted because of one's body in the backdrop of corrupt government motives. Lynn explores the line where love and the pull to purpose connect and complicate, "like when you try to shove two magnets together." They trace the wavering of identity of being a mind in a body, and show how the grief of survival can shape a singular purpose into pure and foolhardy love. This chapbook is an ode to the fallen and the fallen world; at once redemptive and bleak, hopeful and fearful, like returning home after a long time away to see everything changed. Lynn disarms with a body of difficult questions, and invites you to accept fracture, to find humanity in corruption, redemption in grief. How much damage to yourself would you be willing to take, refusing to let go of what is lost?" - Daniel Warner, author of *Shadow Work*

"A document of obsessive love cut with oblique meditations on ability, on posthuman bodies, and on the emotional afterlife of obsolete labor: germ lynn has written a very sad and very recommended postcard from a future that's coming." —Jeanne Thornton, author of *The Dream of Doctor Bantam* and *The Black Emerald*

"Narrated by a caregiver robot over a two-month period in 2061, *What You Call* captures the grim and circular irony of a robotized but politically retrograde (and post-apocalyptic) society where "independent" humans—refugees—survive by learning to live off the land unassisted by technology. The carebot was assembled by a dying woman in her own image to look after her ailing younger sister, Moss. Its affective AI is programed to care for a full-blooded

WHAT PEOPLE ARE SAYING cont'd.

human. When demonic robo-agents in black fatigues descend on their home, Moss and the carebot escape but are separated. Powered by temporary energy fixes from sundry sources, the grieving robot searches for the girl while fighting off its evil counterparts. Damaged, and rejected by “independents,” the carebot realizes that Moss may not need it—that the caregiver is actually dependent on the care-receiver! Bereft of a purpose, the battered robot chooses to extinguish itself in a creek. Its last transmission in 2099 is the message “home.” Readers are prompted—ironically, through the travails of a friendly robot—to juxtapose rosy teleological characterizations of progress with the dangers of technological dependencies. A take-away lesson is the need for humans to retain and embrace their existential resilience.” —Jennifer Robertson, author of *Robo Sapiens Japanicus: Robots, Gender, Family and the Japanese Nation*

Milo (01001101 01101001 01101100 01101111) by Alexander Pyles

“Short, sharp, and chilling.” —Gareth L. Powell, author of *Embers of War*, *Ragged Alice*, and *Ack-Ack Macaque*

“*Milo (01001101 01101001 01101100 01101111)* is a worthy contribution to the literature of transhumanism—economical, clever, and unexpectedly powerful.” —Alec Nevala-Lee, author of *Astounding: John W. Campbell, Isaac Asimov, Robert A. Heinlein, L. Ron Hubbard, and the Golden Age of Science Fiction*

EXCERPTS

Always Blue

By John Dermot Woods

“Air’s not right today. Is it, Mr Schulz?” Stacey Graham avoided eye contact with her instructor. She twisted her ponytail around her wrist and inspected the frayed ends of her hair, pretending vanity concerned her. Her wrinkled linen shirt and loose flannel pants told a different story.

Schulz said nothing. It was his right to be left alone. He was chewing one last smoke on the plaza before their seminar began. Three straight hours of student presentations were on the agenda. These minutes before class qualified as a period of non-interference. They’d created rules about these things for a reason. He was not required to respond to his student—not even expected to—and he wouldn’t. Stacey would have to wait until their class to engage him. He rolled a waxy tube between his palms, getting it good and soft, and bit off its end. A moist chemical tang hit his tongue and he closed his eyes. Warm relief crept over the top of his skull. Stacey moved on.

Air’s not right? What the hell was she talking about? The air was fine. He should know. The Academy had appointed him Distinguished Instructor of Draft Engineering. His work at the City Division of Wind Tuning had ensured that their island city woke up to a blue sky and a moderate temperature every day of the year. The air was always right, goddammit.

Except on those rare gray days, when the valve was released on the system and the moisture and humidity moved through. There were some clouds with enough weight to cast a shadow, sometimes a drizzle of rain. But those days were planned. Everyone knew well in advance. They followed a pattern that he’d established when he still ran the City Department of Wind Tuning. Schulz had the calendar of gray days for the next three years committed to memory. He could assure Stacey, assure anyone in the city, that the air was right. He bit hard on his smoke and let the bitter ooze seep between his lip and gums.

Soon he had a good mouthful of vapor. He filled his lungs and held it. Students read quietly on the benches, while his colleagues conspired as they returned to their offices. He exhaled the smoke into the air. It blew to the left. The stream was supposed to go straight. To go left meant there was a breeze. There could be no breeze—that would mean Stacey was right.

He took another bite off his smoke and filled his lungs. This time, when he exhaled, the vapor floated straight up. He was sure of it. No drafts, no currents, no anomalies. Schulz was glad. The last thing he ever wanted to do was put his skills into practice. A decade at City Tuning was enough. He’d gotten his appointment at the Academy. He was done working.

He couldn’t let a student like Stacey—intellectually unremarkable and generally irritating—get in his head. She had him detecting phantom drafts, traces of catastrophic wind shifts that were rationally impossible. Improbable, at least. Emotions made for bad science.

...

Five full minutes had passed since all twelve students had arrived, taken their seats, and pulled out their notebooks. Schulz, seated in the back row behind them, hadn’t spoken, so no one else had either. Finally, he sat up and

EXCERPTS cont'd.

said, "Shall we?"

Stacey almost leapt from her seat. She was scheduled as the day's first presenter. She approached the lectern at the front of the room, Schulz's usual position, and poked at the laptop tucked inside. The projector woke up and cast her first slide onto the wall behind her: a stock art image of a khaki-clad couple walking down an empty beach, calm surf caressing their toes.

"What are you presenting on, Miss Graham?"

"As you know from my proposal, my study is entitled: 'Recreational Applications of Recent Windflow Technologies.'"

"I was asking for the benefit of your fellow students."

Stacey said nothing, just looked at Schulz, inspecting him across the room. His chair was tipped back, his shoulders pressed against the back wall. She wasn't waiting for a cue; she was waiting for him to slip up.

Schulz dropped his chair forward, the metal feet striking the tile floor more sharply than he'd expected. The eleven seated students all flinched, but none looked back at him.

"Charles," Schulz said, "does Stacey's title compel you?"

An unusually tall and robustly coiffed guy in the first row turned to Schulz, but could not answer. This was Charles Reiser, a student whose prodigious anxiety was not matched by his intelligence.

Charles nodded at Stacey. "Repeat the title."

"Recreational Applications for Recent Windflow Technologies."

"No." Charles readied his pen over his notebook. "It doesn't."

Schulz's students took the social acceptance of candid opinions for granted, but he'd grown up in a time when complex social graces and white lies were still expected. He was old enough to find Charles's response refreshing.

"Let's disabuse Mr. Reiser of his first impression, Stacey."

"That is the purpose of my presentation."

But, despite her confidence, her analysis turned out to be as pedestrian as her title suggested. She offered a parade of generic images exemplifying the predictable fun that a controlled weather environment afforded the residents of their island city, and a couple of spreadsheets that illustrated the consistent income that resorts and smaller concerns (e.g. cabana rentals, beach volleyball leagues, mini-golf tournaments) might expect. Her boldest assertion was her prediction that parasailing would enjoy a renaissance. Had that embarrassing pastime ever been popular?

They'd all lived on an island with perfectly tuned weather for a decade now. Anybody who was half-conscious understood that environmental constancy meant predictable business. Stacey had offered no revelations, no insights at all. So, it was odd when Charles nodded at Schulz as soon as she concluded. Schulz nodded back, granting him permission to speak.

"May I clap?" Charles asked.

"Have at it."

Charles offered Stacey a modest round of applause. The other students joined him. Schulz alone refrained. Stacey kept her focus on her instructor in the back of the room, impervious to her peers' flattery. The projector cast black. She said nothing—that would've been unthinkable—and her expression revealed little—but Schulz knew she was pissed.

EXCERPTS cont'd.

“Antoine,” he said to the student who’d replaced Stacey at the lectern. “The room is yours.”

...

The students filed past Schulz’s desk on the way out of class, picking up their graded essays. Stacy had not earned top marks and he knew she would insist on addressing the issue.

“A second level?” Stacy stared at the paper in disbelief.

“Your presentation fulfilled the dictates of the assignment. But it didn’t offer the invention or exceptional insight necessary for first level marks.”

Stacey tapped her fist against her drawn lips. She and Schulz stood alone in the front of the classroom. Schulz wanted to leave. Quickly.

“Antoine’s topic was ‘Workflow Solutions for Windwall Observation.’ And that received a first level?”

“Did it?”

“I saw what you wrote on his eval.”

“Antoine’s work isn’t pertinent to your own.”

“Except when it’s evidence of discrimination—your vendetta against a specific student.”

“Vendetta?” Stacey was a mediocre student and general pain in the ass. But it would have been absurd to claim that he cared enough about her—or any student—to harbor a vendetta. “Against you?”

“It’s part of a pattern. And this grade is evidence.”

“My crushing blow against you is giving you a second level mark?”

“You’re threatened by me.”

“I am?” There was no way to predict the delusions his students might harbor.

“Your work—your intrepid Windwall—has holes in it.” The Windwall that Schulz had engineered was not a physical wall but a system of climate controls that isolated their island city from the region’s increasingly erratic weather patterns.

“Does it?”

“No one at City Tuning has admitted it. Yet. Your silly colleagues don’t know it. Yet. But I know it. And so do you.”

Schulz appreciated the credit she gave him, but he wasn’t aware of any failures in the Windwall. Still, his smoke blew left this morning. “I’d be interested in seeing your evidence for these...holes.”

“You will soon enough.”

He turned his back on her, ending their conversation. In breach of social protocol, she persisted, “And you fell asleep during my presentation.”

Had he? That was likely.

“I’ve already registered a grievance with the academy,” she said. “I will add today’s behavior to the report.”

Schulz kept his back turned and looked out the bank of windows on the far side of the room. The sky was as blue as it had ever been. He remained still until he could feel Stacey leave. Finally alone, he dropped into a chair in the center of the room.

EXCERPTS cont'd.

Fuck, he thought. Normally he would dismiss this kind of nonsense. The Schulz Windwall—the whole damn system that protected their island city from a world whose climate had stopped forgiving the people who lived on it—was named after him. Job security was not a concern for Schulz. But he'd just applied for promotion, and Stacey's grievance—that might be a hassle.

EXCERPTS cont'd.

Guava Summer

By Vera Kurian

By the time the guavas started appearing, I had been living with an android for slightly over two years in what sometimes felt like a relationship. I never intended for it to happen, but nevertheless, there she was. A self-aware android lounging on our couch in her robe, using a clickable nail pen with thirty different colors preloaded to polish her toenails a dusty shade of lavender. We weren't a couple, but we were. And here I was, hurrying home with the sort of small outrage that you share with your significant other on a daily basis.

"Look at this!" I said, throwing a sack of flour into her arms. "That's a pound of flour."

Grace cradled it like a baby. "Feels like less than that."

"Same price for three-quarters of a pound, plus you have to buy four of these," I said, pulling one of the guavas from my pocket. "Two dollars apiece." She was as confused as I had been at the market. "I said to the guy, I want a pound of flour, and he says, you can only have three-quarters, and four of these for two dollars each. And I said, I don't want those, and he said, you can't buy flour, then."

She took a guava and sniffed it suspiciously. We were used to the sudden and sometimes strange machinations of Big G. Abrupt requests to ration electricity. Demands that we vote in the upcoming election to ensure an orderly and democratic process. Polite but constant requests that we buy something, or not buy something, because it was our patriotic duty to do so, or to not do so.

Suddenly, Grace laughed, exclaiming, "That explains it!" She began to flip through the TV channels before settling on a public service announcement. It consisted of cartoon fruit dancing and singing an infectious little song:

Guava guava guava, my favorite thing to eat!

Guava guava guava, it's such a special treat!

The commercial ended with a fading image of the Supreme Leader with a halo drawn around his head. His benign, round face but ever-watching eyes. She flipped through a few more channels; the PSA was playing on all of them. "Now I have a craving for a certain fruit," I said.

She looked at me with wide, pretending-to-be-innocent eyes. "It is our civic duty."

Strange to think of an android as having a sense of humor, and probably a better one than mine. She was the most advanced piece of technology I had ever seen, and we were still years away from figuring out how she had been programmed to be so human. So similar to the real woman she had been based on.

I set the groceries down and started to prep for dinner. Grace was a lounge singer and sang at two different clubs in the city—Sawtelle, that is—and didn't have to go to work until later that night. My investigative jobs required more erratic hours: I often spent the night following someone through the dark to take photos, wasting the daylight sitting in front of my computer dig, dig, digging. Add to that the minor things I did for free to curry favor, like electronically deleting people's overdue bills, or giving an occasional bump in food rations. I couldn't tell if it was the upcoming election that was making me more paranoid lately, but the work that took me away from our apartment for long stints left me preoccupied with Grace's safety. Her very existence was illegal, as androids had been banned more than a century ago. I didn't know what they'd do to her if they found out the truth. I didn't know what they'd do to me.

EXCERPTS cont'd.

I wasn't a stranger to breaking the law, but who is when just about everything is illegal? For years, I had been making a decent income installing a chip that blocked the little eye at the top of the TV—the TV that was required to be on for three hours a day, an eye that could see when it wanted to. Sometimes it didn't watch, but sometimes it did. Sometimes Big G came for you, but sometimes it didn't.

"Look, your buddy," Grace said, gesturing to the TV where a campaign ad for Sebastian Black was playing. "He's sort of handsome. Is he handsome in real life?"

I concentrated on the mushrooms I was rehydrating. They were cheap and plentiful, something that could almost be mistaken for meat. Grace knew that I worked for Sebastian Black sometimes. She did not know that he was her ex because I had erased her memory.

...

The airtrain from Sawtelle to Delanee City, where I was meeting Sebastian Black, was only four seconds. I knew Black from when he had been campaigning for mayor two years ago. He had originally hired me to figure out what happened to his girlfriend, a woman named Grace. What happened to his girlfriend is that she had been murdered and replaced with an android made in her image. He kept hiring me for other jobs even after I left Delanee— although I wasn't sure if it was because I did good work, or because I was the link to his dead girlfriend.

Delanee was, as always, cloudy and dreary. As I got off at the airtrain station, I shoved my hands into my overcoat and headed for Delanee Park. If someone told me five years ago that I could have a meeting after sundown in that park, I would have laughed in their face. But damned if Sebastian Black wasn't a decent mayor, as "decent" as a corrupt oligarch could be. Right around the time I started ferrying my belongings back and forth between Delanee and Sawtelle, more or less resolving to move in with Grace 2.0, the murder rate in Delanee went down, the long-delayed construction project at the docks broke ground, and a bevy of small loans allowed a proliferation of small businesses to crop up.

Delanee Park used to be a place to buy a hundred different types of drugs or get yourself stabbed. Now it had a functioning fountain and bright green sod, bushes trimmed to neat rows. I stared incredulously at a fox as it looked at me before sitting to chew its own foot dismissively. "What the hell?" I said to myself.

"They eat the vermin," said a voice behind me. I turned to see Black holding two ice cream cones. His pre-mayoral fortune, or at least the money laundering operation that served as a front, was a chain of ice cream shops. He handed me the chocolate chip cone and gestured to the fox's bushy tail. "I had them imported to take care of the rats. Public loves them, everyone's always taking pictures and posting them on social media."

"You're a clever bastard, aren't you?" I took a large envelope from under my arm and handed it to him. It's weird when you know someone in real life and then you see them on TV. It's true TV never quite gets it right, but they must have been airbrushing him. Making him softer. Big G wanted the perfect candidate to win the presidency. Someone greedy enough to do whatever they said for money, smart enough not to get caught in some stupid scandal, and attractive enough to be appealing. Obedient enough to always say yes G, no G, of course not. Photogenic mobster come mayor—Black was the perfect candidate.

We sat on a park bench and he handed me his cone so he could look through the packet. He had asked me to vet six people currently serving on his campaign to see if he could trust them to serve in his administration if he were to

EXCERPTS cont'd.

win. “Aren’t there G guys who do this for you?” I asked, slurping my ice cream.

“I trust you.”

“You don’t trust G?”

He cut his eyes at me, an amused smile curving his lips. “I trust my gut.”

“How does it feel to be the favorite son?”

“Lots of pressure,” he murmured, flipping through the pages. He was smart not to send electronic documents—guys like me could intercept that stuff, let alone the government. He read some more, then shoved the documents back into the envelope. “Good work.” He took back the cone and we started walking.

“Do you know what the hell is going on with these guavas?” I asked.

He laughed, then took a bite of his ice cream. “Big G made a bad investment on Kleas.” Kleas was the sixth planet in our solar system. “It has a great climate for growing guava, so they thought, hey, let’s turn all the farmland into a guava crop to grow the highest yield with the greatest efficiency. Now half the population doesn’t have enough basic staples to eat.”

“Food prices aren’t too hot here, either. Of course,” I added, “once you’re president, all that will change.” Our planet was composed of one large continent; if he became president he would be the “democratic” leader of the entire planet. Above him, and above all the elected presidents who existed to make us think we had a political voice, the Supreme Leader ruled over the entire galaxy. Our precious leader, the all-seeing eye, he who must never be questioned.

Black didn’t laugh at the joke. We rounded a corner and began to weave through what looked like a community garden. Again I was taken aback—that people in Delanee were growing their own potatoes and peas was absurd. “When I was a boy the same thing happened with starfruit,” he said. “We had too many of them, and my older brother got the great idea to try and ferment them into alcohol. He didn’t really know what he was doing, but he smashed up the fruit and mixed it with sugar and put it in an airtight jar. He didn’t realize that the fermentation process creates gas. The bottle exploded and we got into trouble because of all the mess.”

We walked a bit more and I crunched the end of my cone. The man was good at ice cream—the bottom of every cone had chocolate melted into it. “Delanee will be sad to see you go when you win. Things almost look nice here.”

“I’m planning to install loyalists where I can—including here.”

“Already got the playbook, huh?”

“Funny where life takes you. Come, I’ll take you to the car.”

“Car?” Turned out he had a second job for me—to courier some documents to Midway, a city on the way back to Sawtelle. I would take one of his undetectable cars and leave it with one of his lackeys. Sending a person he trusted was always safer.

“How is she?” he asked finally.

“She’s good,” I said. “She’s happy.” I didn’t know if that was entirely true, but the bitter part of me wanted to make a jab at him. That Grace, or some permutation of her, could be happy without him.

EXCERPTS cont'd.

Muri

By Ashley Shelby

One

It had long been whispered that the job, which we were the latest to undertake, turned sane men into lunatics. They returned as babbling idiots who never again step foot on an ice-breaking bulker. Not that they didn't try. The pay was commensurate with the danger of the job so they would shed identities and buy new ones in order to do the run again. Disturbed men can, of course, become synthetically sane for short periods of time; inevitably, though, the adhesive that binds the mask degrades and then the game is up. If they talked, they were visited, and if, after the visits, they continued to talk, they disappeared.

The run is straightforward: from the marshy port of Iqaluit through Frobisher Bay, we coast down the Labrador Current and shimmy through the Strait of Belle Isle before curving east through Cabot Strait, and then sail the familiar Atlantic waters off the east coast of the United States, cruise around the lesser Antilles, with a stop in Ushuaia before we cross the Drake Passage to land the cargo on the Antarctic coast. The stakes are as high as the pay: a captain who fails to complete the run is, by contract and with his full agreement, remanded to the Federal Corrective Training Settlement, a maritime reeducation camp with no publicly known address. By another name, it is banishment.

There have been many explanations for the difficulties experienced by the men who've been on this run: some argue that it's the sulfate aerosol particle veil that hangs over each Pole—the particles dull brains into glue. Others claim the men must have stared into the geo-engineered albedo without their eclipse glasses. Still others assume the crews' strange behavior is the inevitable result of the crushing stress of dealing with the Russian threat—their nuclear subs prowl the Arctic planting flags on the sea floor. Some say it is the nature of the project itself that addles men's minds.

The project had been ongoing for two years without detection by the public. Sure, there had been rumors and warnings from conspiracy theorists who, in this profoundly changed world, were sometimes closer to the truth than even they might believe. However, there was no mistaking that the animals were disappearing even more rapidly than had been expected. When the Western Hudson Bay Group was relocated two years earlier, there had been a resurgence of panic and Impact-related angst, except among the First Nation peoples still trying to hack out a living on the spindly fringes of the Arctic. They knew—were the first to know—and were providing practical knowledge and aid, despite their misgivings. (There had been no need for NDAs—although the indigenous population had been the Paul Reveres of Impact, they had, of course, been ignored. We understood, as they did, too, that if they were to talk about the Relocation project, they would be ignored again.)

Two weeks before I was given command of the Precession, an optimally manned polar class 2 icebreaker, the Intergovernmental Assisted Colonization Program finally made its first public announcement acknowledging the existence of the relocation project. The general public, with much hand-wringing, was overwhelmingly in favor of moving the bears from the Arctic to the Antarctic—to them, the two landscapes were interchangeable. Biologists, however, were apoplectic at the idea. It was “an inversion of the accepted principles of natural biodiversity,” a rich accusation coming from individuals who had supported the creation of Styrofoam floes in the Barents Sea and air-drops of “bear chow” on Ellesmere Island. Their version of natural biodiversity resulted in large swaths of western Canada crawling with grizzly mamas nursing polar bear cubs thanks to their short-lived frozen embryo transplant project. (I quickly came to believe scientists have no useful role in post-Impact logistics.)

EXCERPTS cont'd.

The pod I was charged with transporting from Iqaluit to the Weddell Sea was the last group of polar bears known to be living in the Arctic regions outside of Russia, which refused to participate in the project. These were Baffin Bay bears—the ones who had initially been the hardest to capture and who subsequently became, due to starvation and physical weakness, as docile as dogs.

As the master of the last icebreaker to leave the Arctic with ursine cargo, I underwent special firearms and large mammal training, despite the fact that we'd be traveling with several biologists, a large-animal handler, and a vet. The beasts would never leave their steel enclosures located in the hangar off the operation deck.

I also underwent counseling, during which I was told about this lunacy specific to the Iqaluit run. It manifested itself as hallucinations—even mass hysteria—featuring one common theme: the bears speak. Not in husky-like complaints, but in English, with clear diction and a slight but very strange accent. I was shown film of exit interviews, conducted in a secure facility, by the crew of the infamous Marigold immediately after they landed at Ushuaia. The men maintained that not only did the bears communicate in understandable English, several bears had acted as Able Seamen, capable of performing routine duties, such as taking on lookout shifts and anchor watch. A deck cadet claimed, with a straight face, that a seven-hundred-pound female called Nuna could execute rudder orders. It was on this trip, incidentally, taken before the social media clampdown, that one of the petty officers managed to snap a cell phone video, but when it was posted online, it was widely dismissed as a deepfake. After that, shipboard communication technology was put under lock and key. Cell phones were not permitted on board, except for officers, and the satellite phone was accessible only by the Master, the Chief Officer and the Chief Engineer, so photos no longer hit social media. It was simple for this behavior to be dismissed. Most on board the Marigold—and the Precession, for that matter—remembered pre-Impact.

We were children when things were growing strange. Though we had been protected from the worst disasters, occurring mostly in the Global South, we were habituated early to a certain constant, low-grade anxiety in adults that found its core outside, rather than within. This, we were later told, was different. Things hadn't always been like this. Pre-Impact anxiety, we had been told during training, had been based on “imaginary fears, found mainly in people who had little to be afraid of and who therefore manufactured fear themselves.” (We accepted this definition without speaking of our own anxieties.) With the advent of “reality-based fear,” the kind that germinates in war zones, came deep—bone-deep—sorrow that even children could not misunderstand. How, for example, do you explain to a child who has never experienced the normal contours of spring why many adults preferred death to a world without it?

When the old men and women began to die off there was less fear, but more anger. Sometimes it seemed the anger would overwhelm us all. Sometimes the anger warped perceptions. Under certain conditions the human mind can, like tectonic plates under pressure, undergo cataclysmic shifts. With each slip of the plates and the brutal chafing that results, sanity begins to lose its absolute definition. It's difficult to understand the nature of reality when you have one foot in a vanished world and the other in chaos.

Shortly after that run, the crew of the Marigold was dispatched on a classified assignment in the Southern Ocean—rumored to be where the reeducation camp was located, on a nameless island—and subsequently disappeared. No other crew spoke of talking bears after that, but no crew did the same run twice. I vowed I was not going to become one of the lunatics, the fatwood that would spark a conflagration. I was determined to complete this final run without incident. It was for this reason that I said nothing the first time Muri spoke to me.

EXCERPTS cont'd.

Hard Mother, Spider Mother, Soft Mother

By Hal Y. Zhang

“Did you see the report on the spy from Aberdeen? The game is a-foot.”

I mumbled something like “No, sounds interesting.” All I remember is my usual annoyance at her ability to pronounce hyphens where they don’t belong. We must have been in the living room, her on a rare break from gardening and me trying to divine the future with my seeing stone of a computer. Either I had non-personal coffee in my hand, or my brain decided to add that detail on a later traverse. Why does it only fixate on the useless details—the weird green vase in the corner, the ugly plastic pitcher centerpiece on the table, both overflowing with fresh, bleeding roses—that have nothing to do with the plot?

Our next interaction occurred during my viewing of a video reporting the formation of a new island in the Pacific. How uncannily the uncontrollable underwater caustic flow matched my job search situation, I thought idly in the crook of my elbow. Expert in esoteric studies, puzzles, and internal monologues seeking just about any position, really. Inquire within.

“All going as planned,” she mumbled behind me.

“What?” My neck cracked as I swung my eyes towards her, but she was already back in her universe of sprawled notebooks at the other end of the long mahogany slab. I returned to unceasing dark plumes of smoke, occasional almost-faces forming and sinking between blinks.

Now I wish I could stretch my worldline until right there and sew myself back into the story to do something, anything. Because there was no spy from Aberdeen. There was an ordinary man from Aberdeen who attempted to return a fifty-eight-year-overdue library book so moldy it disintegrated into dust when he slammed it onto the library counter. To her, this was a clue, as was the new island, and the exploding whales with hidden messages scrawled on their organs, then the crater on Mars wearing a woman’s face, then full blown paranoid delusions.

“What’s that?”

On day three I pointed at the edge of an intricate pentagram peeking above her shock of oily black hair. She had one hand propping up her neck and the other furiously scrawling in what must have been her fifth notebook, and they reconfigured into claws, snatching it all away at my question, her eyes feral. I discreetly asked her doctor if he could bring her in for a mental exam, but no, it would be a violation of her rights to not let this farce run to the bitter end.

Yesterday I finally decided I would slip anti-psychotics in her tea, but she was one step ahead, as usual. She told me she was going away. Permanently. The plan was a finished gilded manuscript in her mind, her itinerary planned down to every twist of her bad foot. She was so proud, so solemn, as she gripped my hand and nodded her head a little.

“Thank you for your hospitality.”

Words froze in my throat and shattered, morning frost helpless against her long nails in my palm. Is hospitality how she would describe us? This?

Once upon a time things were simpler. I was her daughter and we were utterly unremarkable. But now she says I was abducted by the shadow international organization—yes, that one—one child of many, and she had to take me in to prove her loyalty. And something about an unpaid debt that she must now repay.

“Why do we have the same face, then?” I asked. The elfish ears and flat nose, incontrovertible facts, a bedrock in my childhood foundation of sanity. We look so alike that strangers grab us in the streets to tell us as much. They ask in jest if a man was even involved.

She waved her hand at such foolishness. It did not deserve a rebuttal. Was it pure randomness and chance in her mind, or my own desperation—perhaps we do not look more alike than any two strangers and those remarks were all planted by shadowy organization number two? Or perhaps a sorting ritual. Imagine a sea of young contestants in a crowd chosen by some faceless red evil on a stage. Arrange yourselves by face shape. The round ones fall through

EXCERPTS cont'd.

the floor. Then the ones with the pointy noses. Repeat until I remain.

No, she probably believes they went one step further: engineered a child who looked like her so she would be kept due to a genetic compulsion of pity. But they didn't program me to resemble her in any other way, and that is why I am so disappointing.

In the time it took for me to think through these scenarios she gathered the last piece of her adventure garb from the hooks, waddled to the door, and shut it behind her.

...

I have to record what I know is true, because even the definition of truth is presently precarious.

I am Ellery Lang, twenty-seven years of age. My mother is Valerie Lang and my father is a lucky sperm in a vial of millions, or so she told me. Merely two weeks ago in uneventful April, I finished school and moved back in with my mother, who appeared to have enough money to spend most of her days in a sunhat fussing over her flowers until the madness took root.

It's been eight hours since she disappeared in body by thoroughly invading me in mind. I've never spent so long thinking about a person as I would a math problem, turning her over and over in my brain and looking for invisible hinges that can be pushed and pulled to reveal some piece of her core. My conclusions are startling.

I don't know her at all, despite spending all of my pre-adulthood with her. I know she worked for the government for many years, and that presumably she was borne of humans, but even that is an assumption. I also know that other people generally know more about their parents, both the superficial and below the epidermis, but it's taken an embarrassingly long time for me to realize this. Children accept anything in equanimity, and my friends and I were too busy hacking and slashing the beasts that lurked in the jungle gym to talk about our parents.

I wasn't born uncurious. I remember attempting to learn about things any child would be naturally curious about—grandparents or the lack thereof, sex, and all the rest. But in all things she was either coldly rational or utterly inexplicable, staring at my flapping mouth as if where's grandma was a jumble of nonsense phonemes. Besides a clinical description of all possible permutations of intercourse between all varieties of people to a far-too-young mind, she revealed absolutely nothing else. I soon stopped asking.

Was I an unwitting youth participant of her elaborate conspiracy theories? How can I not remember so much, and not even remember that I don't remember? Unburied memories are washing up ashore now, piece by piece. Like the sink stacked high with petri dishes of mold for months and months. She'd show the pots to me, call the green and glittery white fuzzballs our special friends, and we'd giggle together. Then the pots would disappear, scrubbed from existence, replaced by completely new ones. Rinse and repeat.

Or how about that time she took my favorite things—my stuffed lamb, my books, my markers—and threw them one by one into the trash as I watched, too confused to ask why?

It's the house, I think. The blank walls let me reconstruct past scenes without distractions, like an old projector finding endless yards of footage hidden inside itself all along.

EXCERPTS cont'd.

What You Call

By germ lynn

2061-08-30T01:15:07+00:00

Moss? Are you there? It's me. I found a charge. Just outside Old Bridge. There is a station and an encrypted channel. It's not far from the cabin, but avoid the tunnels. Agents everywhere.

2061-08-30T01:19:01+00:00

You would like it here, Moss. The trees are scattered so there's plenty of sun. The air is quiet and still. The leaves in the canopy scatter the light in a bright and playful way. I don't mind the open ground, although I guess it makes me easier to spot. But the sun gives me a faint charge, an electric feeling under my...skin.

I'm sorry. I forgot it was all so very raw. I wasn't expecting any of this, least of all the agents banging on the doors, pointing their guns. But I have to tell you this: we can't go back to the cabin, ever. If we want to be together, and I really want to be with you, we have to keep moving. I'm doing everything I can to find you.

I can't stop thinking about the raid. I should have known something was wrong. Do you remember when the animals began to wander close? I would see foxes peering at the house from the thin, crooked line of trees edging the property. Their black eyes were devoid of spark, the sly look that makes a fox a fox. For the first time, the foxes were fearful and stood before me shaking and begging. Then, the pond grew verdant with frogs and toads. Shrieking tones of neon green invaded our backyard. All I could do at night was sit and scan, no sleep or dreams. That's when the agents came.

You heard them before I did. You shot up in your father's reclining chair, lunging at the coat rack and twisting your arms through the sleeves of a heavy jacket that had been discarded there. Do you remember screaming for me to run, run?

I called for you, wiping my hands on my apron as I jostled down the hall, harried by the clatter of the porch door. When I got to the den you were gone. I saw no signs of you. The rocking horse in the corner seemed to move of its own accord, mocking me with a painted grin. The coat rack teetered as if drunk. The porch door swung wide into the night like a wicked smile.

Then, a bolt of lightning serrated the sky, illuminating the black hills surrounding the cabin, and that's when I saw them coming down the hill, dressed in black fatigues, night vision goggles shining in red pairs like demonic eyes.

I ran swiftly, barely making a sound as I escaped through the back door and into the dark, dark woods. When it was safe, I tried to reach you, but you were offline.

I can't stop thinking: why didn't you wait for me, Moss?

Is this about what happened in the garden?

2061-08-30T01:30:52+00:00

I have to keep moving. I never heard back from you. I never thought of what it would be like to be separated until just this moment.

I'm broken.

I guess I can tell you now. My hardware is visible, an unsightly mash of wires above a sunken eye. An agent grabbed me and threw me into a tree. I threw my arms up to guard myself, but he was too strong. He smashed me in the face with the butt of his rifle and the biosheath gave way. My forearm got splintered and my face scraped.

But finding you was too important, and I fought back until I won. I took his arm to replace the one he'd shattered. Once my fragged arm quit sparking and twitching, I discarded it and fused his fresh arm with my stump. It's

EXCERPTS cont'd.

a temporary fix. I didn't want to be uneven; I wanted to pass. It wasn't until I saw my reflection in a puddle that I realized that wasn't happening. But I still like this arm. It makes me feel more human and closer to you, even as you wander far away from me.

I wonder what's calling to you. The screeching jays? The stagnant water and the mosquitoes hovering and buzzing? The iridescent shells of mussels scattered along the river and how they catch the light? Are you seeking the familiar or the novel, now that you're on your own for the first time?

This is all new to me, too. Support units aren't supposed to be on their own. They need someone to care for. It's in our homing...what you call blood.

The agents know what we dream of.

Beware, Moss. They will kidnap and question you just to bait me. They'll take everything, and they'll hack into your device to track me. You must avoid the tunnels. Stick to aboveground. There are other ways into the city. Call me when you find an encrypted channel.

2061-09-01T01:55:06+00:00

Moss, you have messages waiting for you. I'm falling apart, face first. And the bioarm reeks. I searched for the moon because it comforts you, but it was new, so it was dark and lost, just like us. You've been offline. Without support, will you remember your medpack? Will you be too scared to take it? Will you be able to tether and tell me that you're okay?

I found a body in a barn when I was looking for the moon, and for a moment I thought it was you. She looked to be around thirty, like you. And she had a port for tethering, like you—so she has a support unit somewhere out here too, like you.

She didn't make it. She looked thirsty, but she didn't look scared. She was all bone, real bone.

I can only send messages when I get to stations because my tether got busted. I've been trying to find another, but the houses are empty and picked over. There are agents everywhere, confiscating support units and all their accessories.

Few stations along the backroads. Some of them are makeshift, but very clever, almost hidden. I know that I'm not alone in these woods, but I need to set my specs on you.

Go online and I'll scope you.

EXCERPTS cont'd.

A Point of Honor

By Aeryn Rudel

Jacob opened his mailbox and froze. The sight of the scarlet envelope between the bills and advertisements twisted his stomach into cold knots of dread. He'd never seen a declaration from the Bureau of Honorable Affairs in person.

He glanced around the quiet, empty street, terrified someone might see. He snatched the declaration from the mailbox, tucked it into his robe, and hurried inside.

Sara stood at the kitchen counter drinking coffee. "Anything in the mail?"

He pulled the declaration from his robe and tossed it on the counter. It looked like a fresh bloodstain on the white tile.

Sara's eyes widened as she covered her mouth with one hand. "Why do you have that?"

"I don't know. I haven't hurt anyone."

"Of course you haven't. You're a forty-year-old computer programmer."

He grimaced at his wife's blunt assessment. "Maybe it's a mistake. They're a big government agency. They screw up, right?"

"Yes. Yes, a mistake." Sara seized on this scant hope. "Has to be."

There was only one way to know for sure, but the thought of touching the declaration made Jacob nauseous.

"Open it," Sara said, deciding for him.

Jacob slid a finger beneath the sealed flap and ripped open the envelope. Inside was a single folded sheet of white paper with the words Challenger: Mr. G. Olsen printed at the top. His mind raced through names of coworkers, friends, acquaintances, even extended family. Relief flooded through his body. "I don't know him."

"Let me see." Sara took the paper and read, her blue eyes darting across the page. "Well, whoever he is, he's really pissed. He's stating you 'offered him grave and lasting insult' and 'irreparably damaged his standing among his peers.'" She shook her head. "This thing reads like it was written two hundred years ago. Oh, he also wants to kill you."

"He chose lethal?" Relief became exasperation. "That's ridiculous. How the fuck can I 'offer grave and lasting insult' to a guy I've never met?"

"Calm down," Sara said. A guiding principle of their relationship was that he didn't get to be mad; that was her job.

"Can we ignore it?" Jacob said.

Sara's eyes widened. "Ignore it? Are you stupid?"

"I...I'm not stupid."

"You can't ignore it. That would be forfeiture of the duel, and then we'd be screwed. Remember Larry Schilling?"

Jacob had met Larry, a short balding guy, at a Christmas party hosted by Sara's work. A few weeks after that, Larry had too much to drink at a local bar and got into a political debate with another patron. There had been some shoving and name-calling, but the bouncer broke it up. Unfortunately, the guy's friend recorded the altercation on his phone. Larry received a declaration from the Bureau of Honorable Affairs the following week. He was in his fifties with a heart condition and in no shape to fight anyone. He ignored the declaration and the bureau listed him as a duel dodger. Shunned by friends and family and unable to get a job, he put a shotgun in his mouth a month later.

Jacob swallowed. "Okay, what do we do?"

"You have fourteen days to answer," Sara said. "So we go down to the Bureau, talk to an agent, and figure this out."

"Yeah, okay." Sara always knew what to do. "They'll see the mistake and withdraw the challenge."

Sara dropped the declaration on the counter and put her arms around him. "It's gonna be okay." He took comfort in another principle that held their marriage together: she loved him, and he loved her. Sometimes that even made

EXCERPTS cont'd.

up for the bad stuff.

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The Bureau agent loomed behind his desk like a grim office warlord. His face, maybe handsome at some point in the distant past, seemed to be molded entirely by violence. He had more scars than Jacob could count, a nose that had been broken until only a squashed lump remained, and misshapen cauliflower ears reminiscent of flesh-colored potstickers.

Jacob and Sara sat in front of the man's desk, and he flashed them a smile that somehow made him more fearsome. He'd not given them his name. "Mr. Mayweather." The agent's voice was surprisingly soft and measured. "I've reviewed your case, and everything looks to be in order."

"How can that be?" Sara said. "Jacob doesn't know this person."

"I looked into the matter, and it is quite evident your husband does know the challenger," the agent said.

"I'd like to see some proof." Jacob hated the way his voice shook. He didn't want to look afraid in front of this man, but he couldn't help it.

"Of course," the agent said. "The Bureau of Honorable Affairs is a transparent organization." He opened a drawer, pulled out a folder, and slid it across the desk. "These transcripts should clear things up."

Inside the folder were three sheets of paper, each a record of a conversation. There were two participants: Sandman69 and GabO. The second name stole the breath from Jacob's lungs. GabO could only be G. Olsen.

"What does it say?" Sara asked.

He tried to think of a way to explain it all to his wife, but he couldn't. It was too absurd.

Sara pulled the folder from his hands and examined the contents. Her eyes grew wider as she read, and her lips curled in disgust. "What is this?"

The agent answered. "That is a transcript of a conversation between your husband and a man named Gabriel Olsen. The conversation took place over a service called LiveWire. It's often used so individuals playing cooperative video games can communicate with one another."

"A video game?" Sara said. "You know this guy from a video game?"

"It's not a big deal," Jacob said, knowing how ridiculous it all sounded. "When I play Path of Honor, I mess with people sometimes. It's called grieving. Everybody does it."

Sara turned to him, her eyes chips of ice. "Are you telling me you said all the horrible things written here? I've...I've never heard you use some of these words, these slurs before."

"I don't use words like that in real life," Jacob said. "Come on, nobody takes that shit seriously. It's not real."

The agent smiled again, showing teeth, a predator's gape. "Mr. Olsen takes it quite seriously. Moreover, the Bureau has now made allowances to handle insults levied over services like LiveWire."

"Hey, I'm not gonna fight this asshole," Jacob said.

The agent shrugged. "That is your right, Mr. Mayweather, as long as you understand the consequences."

"You'll be a duel dodger." Sara slumped in her chair. Disgust and rage warred for control of her features. "You'll be on the list. You'll lose your job and everyone will know you're a coward."

The agent nodded. "If you refuse the duel, we'll make the announcement through the normal channels, and we'll add your name to the list." He leaned forward and put his broad, callused hands on the desk. "You know, Mr. Mayweather, a lot of people think being on the list is worse than dying."

The memory of Larry Schilling and his shotgun loomed. "No, this isn't fair," Jacob said. "I don't deserve this."

"You hounded this Gabriel Olsen like a schoolyard bully. Did he deserve that?" Sara asked.

"It's not like that," Jacob said. "I was just fucking around."

Sara flipped to the last page in the folder and shoved it at Jacob. "This is just fucking around? You hacked his social media accounts. You posted all this awful shit and made it look like it came from him. All his friends and

EXCERPTS cont'd.

family saw it, his boss, his coworkers.” She was shouting now. “How could you be so stupid? How could you be so... cruel?” Tears streamed down her face, and that, more than her anger, crushed him.

He looked at the ground, unable to meet her gaze. “People do it to me too.” The excuse felt like ashes on his tongue.

“And that makes it okay?”

He shook his head, fighting tears of his own. He’d started picking on Gabriel through Path of Honor, taunting him because he sucked at the game. Gabriel asked him to stop, pleaded with him through direct messages, but that awoke something in Jacob. It felt good to have someone beneath him. It was easy to hack Gabriel’s accounts, and watching him scramble to take down all the terrible things Jacob posted was so satisfying.

Sara was still shouting, still reading aloud from those damning transcripts. He tried to shut that out and turned to the agent. “How did he find me?”

The agent held up one hand. Sara fell silent. There was no denying this man. “Mr. Olsen brought us the transcripts and showed us the rest of your activities. We decided he had grounds for a challenge.”

“You helped him find me,” Jacob said. A chasm of fear and darkness opened beneath him.

“Of course,” the agent said. “This is a point of honor.”

EXCERPTS cont'd.

Milo (01001101 01101001 01101100 01101111)

By Alexander Pyles

Am I whole?

Am I a person?

I can't help but ask these things as I trace the curvature of my new face in the LED light of my bathroom. The surface of my face is cool and hard, or am I imagining it? These sensations are not my own anymore. My hand is nothing but well-timed gears and tubes, interlocking, connected to wires and cords spliced directly into my cerebellum. The sense of feeling textures is all caught up in the psychosomatic now. Solely haptic feedback.

"Is this what I 01110111 01100001 01101110 01110100 01100101 01100100[wanted]?" I finally say aloud. Even the sound of my voice is strange—clipped and sterile. Reminds me of a hospital intercom.

No one answers my question. I am alone after all. I let the silence fill in the blanks.

I look back at the now useless wheelchair in the corner and accuse it with my eyes. Are they eyes or sensors? They're radiant quarter-sized disks. They glow white and stare at the outdated, offensive piece of metal and canvas, a concrete reality of my illness and what informed my decision. The new body.

...

"How goes it, Milo?" My cheery friend, Darius, greeted me coming up the sidewalk. He was the only person who would talk to me, even as I languished in the chair.

"You know, same old, same old," I said, falling into our usual verbal dance. I flashed him my best I-want-to-die smile and he continued down the street towards his work. I placated Darius and he could go about his day, carefree, without worrying about my mental health.

No one else seemed to want to talk to someone like me. My body did not fit the mold that was pushed on me. On the surface, I seemed fine. I got looks that affirmed this. Their eyes asked, "Why don't you just walk? Why don't you just get out of that chair?" They didn't know that I was dying from the inside out.

No, not cancer or some sort of exotic, rare disease. The illness was purely happenstance. As average and common as milk. A birth defect. A genetic lottery where I lost and lost hard. It was a nerve disease. One that most people weren't aware of. All I could do was wait for the creeping deterioration to eventually take my life away. Euthanasia was casually suggested during doctor visits or at routine checkups when I was younger. My parents refused. They had already fought a war to keep me from being aborted. The doctors almost wrote a petition. My parents won, but did I?

Not really. I told them I wanted to die. I knew I would hate the chair. It would be a prison. My father only shook his head and told me that suffering was good for the soul. Fuck that. Chances were I could never work up the nerve to end it anyway, and in my current state, I doubt it would even be possible.

And as if my physical state hadn't been enough, my father died by some irony unknown to me and I felt like I had to carry on with the time he seemingly bought me. Simple as that, right?

I thought simply surviving was my only option, but every day I wondered if there might be a way out.

...

EXCERPTS cont'd.

“Milo, you need to see this,” Darius said as he grabbed his phone from his pocket. A decade ago, phones were thick slabs of tech. Now they were these thin sheets of plastic and metal, still opaque black.

“What now?” I asked. There were so many “miracle” cures out there that I had become embittered to them. Hopes can only be dashed so many times before you become resigned to an expiration date.

“Two words: robot body.”

“Fuck outta here.”

“No. This is it.” Darius flicked through the images his phone projected onto the wall in front of us. A news story about the latest breakthrough in robotics—and my cure.

“Okay, becoming like some retro Terminator or Andy is cool and all, but what does this have to do with me? I’m not a gearhead.” Gears were tuned into implants and other cybernetic enhancements, like something out of an old sci-flick. I wish I could have tapped my foot like I’d seen some annoyed people do.

“You aren’t actually looking.” The guy was relentless with his optimism, but he did always find the silver linings to my dark moods. His faux-naiveté served him. I hated him for it, the willful ignorance, but he was one of the few people who saw past the disease.

“Fine, I’ll give it a good look, for your sake,” I said. Maybe that would buy me a month without him bringing up another inane cure.

The news flashed images of new automatons and various robot parts that seemed human, but were decidedly not. The parts were too thin, streamlined, entirely other.

The images switched to a hospital room where a body was laid out. I couldn’t tell if it breathed, but the doctors were seemingly fitting the robotics to the flesh. Another skip and the metal chassis was part of a person who breathed and now walked right out of the room. They strode on two robotic legs. Uncanny.

“This is bullshit, Dar,” I said. “There isn’t a chance in hell that you’re getting me into something like that. No way.”

“Let’s see if we can. Let’s just see.”

...

Upon arriving at the facility, I found out that the flesh in the video was synthetic. The commercial had left that part out. It wasn’t a partial job. It was an entire reset. A reboot. An upgrade. A rebirth.

Brain out. Brain in.

Now, here I was. Standing for the first time. In a hospital bathroom. In a new body. My body. Even my face is merely a formed image, projected from various emitters. The surgery—or fabrication, really—was radical. Revolutionary. Utterly perverse. But then, my only requirement was to walk again. This was the only way for me. It was surefire. It was 01000100 01101111 01101110 01100101[done].

OTHER TITLES



Aftermath: Explorations of Loss & Grief is the first book in our publishing program. It's an anthology that weaves together a broad collection of voices to illustrate the many forms of loss. The topics range from the inevitable breakdown of a relationship to an immigrant family struggling to retain their culture as they attempt to assimilate. In their interpretation of the book's theme, the selected stories run the spectrum from heartfelt, raw, and powerful to lighter and humorous.

This body of work reveals how, despite the differences of our day-to-day lives, we are all connected.

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