

Down on the Truck Farm by Thomas A. Easton

The house was a Swiss chalet with a cantilevered deck. It looked like it would be quite at home on a mountainside, overhung by beetling cliffs, overlooking some deep valley through which ran a far-off thread of silver. Jimmy Brane could close his eyes and imagine the thin whistle of mountain wind, the echoing yodels of distant shepherds, the bleating of sheep and goats in some meadow just around the bulge of the alp. He didn't have to imagine the smell of honeysuckle.

He knew he should laugh at himself, but he just didn't have the energy. The house was supported not by a mountain but by a massive gengineered beanstalk, stiffened by a single concrete pillar. The deck was overhung by bean leaves the size of tabletops, and it overlooked only the yard next door.

It was no coincidence that Jimmy was leaning on the deck's railing and staring at that yard now. That was where his best friend, Tommy, had lived. Now Tommy's mother lay stretched out on a towel, dark haired and nearly bare, sunbathing, sipping again and again, as she did all day, every day, at.... Until very recently, she had always been puttering about her pumpkin house, touching up the sealants that had been sprayed onto the dried shell, washing windows, pruning the vine that still provided shade. But she had once fooled around with the chalet's previous owner, and Tommy had found out. He had, in fact, learned that the man he had always called his father bore to him no blood relationship at all. That was when he had run away.

Tommy hadn't even waited to graduate from high school. He had cut and run, leaving Jimmy to peer over the railing at the ground below and think that, yes, he was high enough. High school was behind him now, and he didn't want to go to college-he hadn't even applied!-and he didn't want a job and his best friend was God knew where. He could climb up on the railing and bend his knees and dive out past the gnarly twists of bean stem and the billows of honeysuckle blossoms, their viney stems twined around the beanstalk, arch his body against the sky, and plunge down headfirst upon the flagstoned patch that held the family's Neoform Armadon.

Instead, he leaned over the railing to wave away a drunken hummingbird and pluck a choice honeysuckle blossom, the size of a wine glass, its narrow base plump with nectar. He held it up to the light, marveling at its shadings of rose and cream, at how quickly the vine had grown that spring when the seed had appeared, dropped by some high-flying bird or planted by a wandering jonnyseeder, in the soil below. There had been no such thing just the year before. Now they were everywhere, and some people said they were a problem. But....

Tommy's mother, Petra, had just plucked another for herself. He gestured with his own, though he knew she would not see his acknowledgement of what they shared. Then he tipped the blossom up and drained its liquid contents down his throat. He shuddered at the cloying sweetness, but he did not regret the dose. There was a self-fermented alcoholic tingle as well, and beneath that a mellowing, relaxing, euphoric haze. He stopped caring about friends, jobs, schools, long falls to nowhere, everything except reaching for another blossom.

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“Hey, Ma! He's been suckin' honey again!”

Jimmy opened one eye. That was his kid brother, Caleb, taking a thirteen-year-old's malicious pleasure in the shit that was about to fly Jimmy's way. He was standing in the half-open door to the house, staring, grinning, at Jimmy sprawled in the wood-and-canvas deck chair, at the honeysuckle blossoms littering the floor around him, at one last blossom crushed in a sticky hand.

Jimmy wished his older sister were still at home. She would be more sympathetic. But she had gone off

to college two years before, and....

“Hey, Ma!”

It was not their mother who came to the door, one hand holding a glass of water, the other a pair of yellow pills. It was Dad, tall, thin to the point of gauntness, balding, his face lugubriously sad, his head shaking, his voice tsking, “Sober up, boy. You’re supposed to be helping us get the carpet up. Not....” With the hand that held the pills he gestured toward the house next door. “You want to wind up like Petra? She lost her son, not just a friend.”

Jimmy made a face. Outlaw gengineers had turned the honeysuckle loose upon the world, and no one had been able to get rid of it since. But the biochemists, as ingenious in their way as the gengineers, had promptly devised an antidote for the euphoric in the nectar. The yellow pills contained a mixture of that antidote and the much older alcohol detoxicant. In mere moments, his system was free of both drugs and he was staring longingly once more at the pumpkin across the way. A best friend was not *just* a friend.

“C'mon, Jimmy.” He shook Caleb's hand off his arm, levered himself out of his low seat, and followed his father into the living room. For a little while then, he helped move the couch, easy chairs, end tables, books and bookcase, into other rooms. Then he pried nails from the floorboards, rolled the old, worn carpet into a wormlike cylinder, sneezed at the dust he stirred, and marveled at the circular marks upon the wood beneath.

His mother blew her nose and ran her fingers across the marks. “Water stains,” she said. She was Dad's total opposite, short, round, her hair thick and blonde. Caleb's hair was like hers. Jimmy's was thinner, drabber, like his father's. “And ground-in dirt. And just a hair of indentation. Someone had flower pots in here once. Heavy ones.”

Jimmy wondered if that someone had been Tommy's father. But that thought evaporated as the carpet company's delivery van, a Bioblimp, arrived, lifted off the house's roof with its muscular tentacles, and replaced the roll of old carpet with one of new. He stepped onto the deck once more to watch the van drift down the breeze, not yet using the propellor mounted on the rear of its crew pod. Its main ancestor had been some simple jellyfish. The gengineers had vastly enlarged it, swelled it up with hydrogen, given its tentacles muscles that belonged more properly to an octopus or squid, and equipped it with cargo pockets whose genes had come from kangaroos. Behind him, he could hear his mother running the vacuum cleaner across the bare floor, removing all the grit and dust that had sifted through and accumulated beneath the old carpet.

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When the new carpet was in place and the furniture was restored to its positions, the whole family took their seats—Jimmy's mother and Caleb on the couch, Dad in his recliner, Jimmy in the antique wing chair—and admired the carpet. That was when Dad sighed and said, “Jim. We have got to do something about you.”

Jimmy shifted uncomfortably. Caleb snickered until his mother pinched his thigh.

“You've finished school,” Dad went on. “At least until you decide to go on. But you don't seem to want a job. And you're drinking far too much honeysuckle wine.”

“Yessir,” said Jimmy. He stared at the carpet between his feet, preferring its clean, fresh neutrality to the disapproval of his parents, or the glee of his little brother.

“If this keeps up,” said Dad. “If this goes on, you'll be just another honey-suckin' bum.”

Caleb managed to get out a single snicker before squeaking a muffled, "Ouch!"

Dad slapped his thigh. "So," he said. "Tomorrow, I'm taking you out to the Daisy Hill Truck Farm."

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It was a sad fact that the morning after tanking up on honeysuckle wine, antidote or no antidote, one had a headache, not the blinding sort, but a sullen, throbbing thing that would respond only to a nip of honey. The aspirins Jimmy found beside his breakfast plate were no help at all.

After breakfast, Dad led the way to the elevator that occupied the center of the beanstalk's supporting pillar. He did not let Jimmy have a moment on the deck to grab a honeysuckle blossom, and when they reached the ground, his hand on his son's shoulder kept Jimmy from stepping off the path.

"C'mon," he said. "You have your license." He steered Jimmy toward the door on the driver's side of the family Armadon and held it open. It revealed the bucket seats and control panels that occupied the space grown in the genimal's back, and when Jimmy climbed in, it closed with a solid "Chunkk!"

"But you still need practice. So you drive. I'll tell you when to turn."

The Armadon was a genengineered armadillo. Somewhat larger than a panel truck of the last century, it had no tail. The lower portion of its rigid hide swelled out to form four wheels, each one wearing a black rubber tire. The genimal's legs were mounted high, above the wheels, their joints reversed; as they ran, they pushed against the tires, spun the wheels on their bony hubs, and propelled the vehicle down the grassy greenways that had replaced paved roads early in the Biological Revolution.

Obediently, Jimmy toggled the genimal out of its night-time dormancy and took the tiller in his hand. He didn't have much to say. He knew about the truck farm, and he could guess why his Dad wanted to take him there-Dad hoped he would get inspired, discover a vocation, swear off the honey forevermore, and straighten out. Fat chance, he thought.

Fortunately, the trip would not take long. There was not far from their neighborhood an entrance to the major highway that led traffic away from the city and toward the countryside where the land was available for truck farms and other agricultural operations. At this time of day, most of the traffic was city-bound commuters in wheeled Armadons and Roachsters, legged Hoppers, Tortoises, and Beetles, and grand Mack trucks hauling pods and trailers full of goods, chrome eighteen-wheelers dangling from collars beneath their bulldog jowls. An occasional police Hawk hovered overhead. A construction site featured long-legged Cranes and earth-moving Box-turtles. An Alitalia Cardinal and an American Bald Eagle circled above the local jetport. Shovel-jawed litterbugs patrolled the shoulder, darting at every break in the traffic onto the greenway to retrieve the wastes inevitably left behind the vehicles.

Honeysuckle vines covered the embankments beyond the shoulder, and in the shadows beneath an overpass, Jimmy noticed several full-time honey-suckers. Jimmy read the papers and knew that they died of malnutrition and disease and exposure and then fell prey to the omnipresent litterbugs, but he was not at all sure their fate was so horrible. They were the honey-bums his father prayed he would not join. They were poor and tattered, but such was the power of the euphoric in the honey they loved that they were nevertheless carefree and content with their lot. Was that indeed what awaited Jimmy? He didn't think that honeysuckle wine had that much of a hold on him, though he did love the stuff.

A Roadrunner roared past them, its rider bent low over the extended neck, his face hidden by a globular helmet. "Next exit," said Dad, and the highway gave way to a smaller road poorly enough maintained that in spots, where the turf was thin, the pavement of a generation before showed through. A few more miles, and they began to see the white-boarded fences of the truck farm. The barns became visible

beyond a grove of trees, and then they could see the iron-barred runs, some of them containing young trucks. A herd of cattle, mingled Guernseys and Black Angus, milk and meat, grazed a pasture. The barns grew nearer and the wide doors along their sides became visible, while Jimmy wondered at the lack of a farmhouse. By the road stood a low concrete building that looked like it must hold only offices. A truck, its trailer full of grain for feed, was backing into the farm's main drive.

There was no honeysuckle to be seen. If it had ever taken root here, the farm's staff had carefully eradicated it. Jimmy did not care whether the reason had been to keep the staff or the stock clean. He did care that it was absent, for he was beginning to crave a sip, just a sip, he told himself.

“Park there,” said Dad. He pointed toward the side of the office building.

Jimmy nosed the Armadon into a space between a Roachster and an antique automobile whose axles were supported by metal jacks. The antique's paint was protected by a plastic tarpaulin. A medallion, left visible where the tarp did not cover, identified the car as an Oldsmobile.

As he shut their vehicle down, a door opened in the side of the building. Jimmy caught a glimpse of pastel walls, glass partitions, and elaborate computer workstations where, he would have guessed if he had cared, new trucks must be designed. Then he focused on the man stepping toward them. He was tall but heavy-set, and the roundness of his face was accentuated by a receding hairline.

“Mr. Brane!” He met Jimmy's Dad with a broad smile and an outstretched hand as he stepped from the Armadon. “This is your boy. I've been looking forward to meeting you both.”

Jimmy scowled. He hadn't cared for patronizing sons of bitches when he was in high school, and he didn't like them now. He wished he dared to jump back in the Armadon and take off, but.... Honey or no honey, Dad would make his life miserable for sure. And he didn't really want to disappoint his parents. He was depressed for loss of his friend, but he did still love them. He supposed he even loved Caleb.

Their host gestured toward the nearest barn. “Call me Mike. Mike Nickers. We can begin the tour in here.”

A narrow corridor ran down the center of the barn, with wooden doors opening into large bays. A small window in the nearest of the doors gave Jimmy a glimpse of something large and moving, but before he could identify it, their guide directed their attention to a large photo on one wall and said, “This is the bus barn. We've been trying to develop a good long-distance vehicle.” He tapped the photo with an outstretched finger. “Years ago, they tried to make a Greyhound, but the back wasn't strong enough, and it didn't have the stamina.”

Despite himself, Jimmy was feeling some interest. “What about the Bernies? They're all over town.”

Nickers nodded. “Their backs are okay, but they still can't make the long trips.” He led them to the first of the barn's bays and opened its door to reveal an immense genimal with six legs and a flattened back. The floor was covered with hay. A larger door at the other end of the bay opened to the outside. “We turned to peccary stock. We handled the back by giving it an extra pair of legs. Had to double the rib cage and pectoral girdle to make them work, but we got a double heart-lung system in the process, and that made the stamina beautiful.”

“Couldn't you have done that with a Greyhound?” asked Jimmy's Dad.

Nickers shrugged. “We tried. But it didn't turn out very well. And besides, we liked the name we got this way. We call 'em Roadhogs.”

He led them past other bays. One contained a Roadhog with a bus-pod strapped on, and Jimmy realized why the engineers had designed the back to be flat. Another contained a female Roadhog lying on its side while a litter of young rooted at her belly, nursing. In the last, a female displayed a bulging belly. "As you can see," said Nickers, "we've entered the production phase. And in case you're wondering, the mating is handled by artificial insemination. The Bioform Regulatory Agency insisted that we remove any ability to respond to heat pheromones."

As he held the barn door open for them, he added, "Want some coffee?" Jimmy and his Dad both nodded. He pointed-"Over here. It's the maternity ward for the trucks."-and led them to a small waiting room in the next barn.

When Jimmy entered the room, he found two young people clad in coveralls. They were not much older than he, and they wore shoulder-patches marked with the farm's distinctive logo, a black-eared white beagle. Nickers closed the door, and the stertorous sounds of idling trucks elsewhere in the barn were slightly muffled. "Two of our trainees," he said. "Julie, Dan, this is Jimmy Brane."

Julie and Dan quickly finished their drinks, said "Work to do," and left. When the others had full cups from the dispenser on the wall, Nickers showed them more bays, each of these containing a pregnant or nursing truck. Most showed their bulldog ancestry very clearly in their flattened faces. A few had a more wolfish appearance. "Husky stock," said Nickers. "For the far north." In each case, the trucks' collar ornaments had been removed and hung from hooks on the walls.

Jimmy was pouring the last of his coffee into his mouth, thinking that it was a poor substitute for honeysuckle wine, when a sudden shout broke the quiet of the ward: "Get the tractor! Hurry!"

"Come on!" Nickers cried, throwing his empty cup into the nearest waste basket. "Here's something most visitors don't get to see." They ran behind him to the bay at the far end of the barn and crowded together to peer through the glass. "Look at that big mother! That's our vet." Nickers pointed at a small woman in a white coat who was leaning over a truck whose sides, swollen until she looked more like an Army tank than an oversized, civilian dog, heaved with the convulsions of labor. The truck's panting breaths echoed in the bay.

The great door at the end of the bay was creaking upward. As soon as there was room, an old, gasoline-powered farm tractor roared in, and a coveralled young man jumped off its seat.

"Chains!" cried the vet, and her assistant unwound heavy steel chains from the rear of the tractor and handed them to her.

Nickers explained: "It's a hard birth. With cattle, a come-along will do, but that just isn't powerful enough for a truck."

The vet was up to her shoulders in the truck's birth canal, doing something with the chains. When she was done, she screamed at her assistant, "Get that thing turned around!" When he had obeyed, she attached the chains to a tie-ring behind the seat and screamed again: "Move!"

The engine roared, the chains grew taut, and there was a sucking sound as the newborn pup emerged into the world. The tractor stopped, the chains went slack, and the vet tenderly removed them from the infant truck. It was three times the size of an adult, unmodified Saint Bernard, but naked, wet, and blind. The mother extended one paw to rake it in close to her side, where it began to nuzzle while she licked it clean.

Nickers sighed with relief. "They'll both be all right." A moment later, he said, "Look. The next one's coming on its own." Jimmy watched, and the tender smile on the vet's face brought an answering smile to

his own, even as his fist clenched in sympathy with the laboring mother and his nails drove into his palms. The vet obviously loved her giant charges, just as he had loved the mongrel bitch the Branes had once owned. Her name had been Ruffles. It had been the high point of his tenth year when she had had pups. But then they had had her spayed. She had disappeared when he was twelve.

“You’ll love the next barn.”

“What is it?” asked Jimmy.

But Nickers said nothing more, even when they stood outside their next stop. Instead, he simply opened the door, stood aside, and said, “We clean up every morning, but....”

Jimmy and his Dad both choked when the thick, pervasive odor hit them. Nickers only shrugged and smiled; he was used to it. It took a moment, but in the way of noses, Jimmy’s soon stopped protesting, and he was able to step through the door.

This barn was not divided into bays. The door Nickers held open let them into a small chamber whose walls had been welded together from inch-thick steel bars. It reminded Jimmy of nothing so much as a shark cage, the kind used to protect tourists who want close looks at man-eaters. Similar cages enclosed the barn’s other doors. Between the cages, the barn was one cavernous room.

That room held at least fifty short-legged bulldog puppies. They ran in circles. They rolled. They yipped. They tumbled in fuzzy balls. They chewed on each other and old tires and logs. They lapped water that bubbled up in a concrete basin. They sniffed assiduously in the corners of three food troughs that might each have held a whole Armadon. Some even slept, curled up wherever the hay that littered the floor had been swept by ceaseless motion into piles.

Jimmy did not truly appreciate the size of the puppies until they reacted to the presence of the three men in the entry cage. Then, as they all stopped running, rolling, yipping, tumbling, chewing, lapping, sniffing, and sleeping and thundered toward the steel bars, he realized the truth: Every one of those puppies was the size of an old-fashioned pickup truck.

Nickers shouted, “Down!” The pups sat quietly just outside the bars. They did not whine or growl or prance. Their tongues, the size of bedsheets, lolled. Their short tails hammered cheerfully on the concrete floor. Nickers unlatched a gate on the inner wall of the cage and indicated that Jimmy and his Dad should go through. “They’ll behave,” he said. “Just watch your step.”

“How do you ever housebreak them?” asked Dad.

“We don’t. They’re too big to come in the house, and outdoors there’s usually a litterbug around.”

Jimmy was paying no attention to the pragmatic conversation behind him. Nor was he thinking of honeysuckle wine, or of lost friends. He was stepping through the gate into the midst of the puppy throng, staring, reaching, petting, finding that their coats were much rougher than he had expected, but.... They were white, black, brown, spotted, cute and ugly, large and larger. He focused on one that reminded him of a dog he had once seen in an old, old movie: it was a dark brindle, with a single white circle around one eye. “You’re Tige,” he said, and he faced it, eye to barrel-sized eye, nose to wind-tunnel nose, and held out a hand for it to sniff.

Tije’s mouth opened, and the immense tongue soaked the boy from foot to head.

Jimmy’s fate was sealed.

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“Yes,” said Nickers later. “I’m a recruiter. And the pups are my best tool.” They were in a small room in the farm’s office building. The soft lighting was focused on Nickers’ polished desk, though Nickers sat on a low couch against the wall. Jimmy and his Dad faced him from comfortable armchairs across a coffee table bearing a single pristine sheaf of papers. All three once more had cups of coffee in their hands. “We put the word out, and parents bring kids who don’t know what to do with their lives. We give ‘em the four-bit tour, and then we let the pups do their best. Which is pretty good.”

Jimmy was wearing a Daisy Hill Truck Farm coverall. His own clothes were tumbling in a dryer somewhere on the premises. Now he said, “So what’ll it cost me to get Tige?”

“Not a nickle,” said Nickers. He grinned and slapped one knee with a hand. “We don’t sell the pups.”

Jimmy’s face fell.

“I don’t recruit customers,” he added. “But truckers. If you wish, you move into the dorm upstairs over the puppy barn, and we train you while the pup-Tige-grows up. You work around the farm-you met Julie and Dan-and help train Tige. Then you work for us as a trucker. Driving Tige. And in ten years, Tige is all yours.”

Jimmy was silent, thinking that the deal sounded reasonable enough. He reached for the papers on the coffee table. The top one was a contract. The others were informational, telling him the rules of the establishment, what he should bring with him, where the nearest shopping areas and public transportation stops were.

“One thing,” said Nickers. “Your father’s told me about the honey.” He shook his head. “We tolerate none of that here. No drugs of any kind.”

Somehow, Jimmy was not surprised. It fitted what he had thought about why his Dad had brought him here, and what he had seen-or failed to see-on the grounds. But the thought no longer bothered him. Tige had already begun to fill the void in his heart. He reached for the contract.

Nickers stopped him. “Not so fast. Take it with you, and think it over. For now....” He rose and opened the office door. “Alex?” He turned back to Jimmy. “Another trainee. He’ll get you your clothes. They should be dry by now. And you can keep the coverall.”

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“Those puppies,” said Jimmy. “Do you remember Ruffles?” The farm’s contract and other papers were on the kitchen table. The coverall was draped over a chair so the shoulder patch logo showed clearly.

“But they’re so huge!” cried his mother. The whole family was sitting around the table. Jimmy’s head was bent, his hands clasped before him, his voice soft. The others’ eyes shifted constantly from the coverall to Jimmy to the contract, and back again.

“Yeah!” said Caleb. “Though I’d rather have a Roadrunner.”

“If I drive Tige for just ten years, he’ll be all mine.” He was thinking the farm’s deal over, he was, though he didn’t expect the process to make much difference. Puppies and their all-forgiving, all-compensating love were not just for little kids, and if he had to become a trucker to get Tige, he would.

“And what then? How will you feed him?”

“I’ll have to stay a trucker, won’t I?”

“A Mack that big is no pet.”

And Jimmy thought: Was puppy love no more than a trap, a lure for a vocation that would forevermore have him hustling to feed the pup, as well as himself, and eventually a family? Nickers had said as much, hadn't he?

“You won't be able to vege out on honeysuckle wine,” said Caleb. There was a touch of “nyahh-nyahh” whine in his voice, but Jimmy ignored it. Nickers had said that, too, and though his head still ached and somewhere deep inside him lurked a craving for the honey, he thought he could handle it. He was not, after all, addicted to the stuff. He liked it, he wanted it, but it did not rule him the way it did the honey-bums he had seen under the highway overpasses.

Jimmy reached for the contract, drew it closer, and paused. He looked within himself for the honey craving. He measured it against his craving for Tige, for maturity, for life.

He straightened his back and looked at his Dad, sitting across the table. His mother noticed and began to cry.

“Got a pen, Dad?”

His father quietly drew a pen from his shirt pocket and, his own eyes glistening, held it out.

About the Author

Thomas A. Easton (1944-) is a biologist, textbook author, and science fiction novelist and critic with a strong interest in the interactions of science, technology, and society. His most recent book is *Taking Sides: Clashing Views on Controversial Issues in Science, Technology, and Society* (Guilford, CT: Dushkin Publishing Group, 4th ed., 2000).