

Jack Neck and the Worry Bird

a short story by Paul
Di Filippo

On the western edge of putty-colored Drudge City, in the neighborhood of the Stoltz Hypobiological Refinery ("The lowest form of intelligent life--the highest form of dumb matter!"), not far from Newspaper Park and Boris Crocodile's Beanery and Caustics Bar--both within a knucklebone's throw of the crapulent, crepitant Isinglass River--lived mawkly old Jack Neck, along with his bat-winged and shark-toothed bonedog, Motherway.

Jack Neck was retired now, and mighty glad of it. He'd put in many a lugubrious lustrum at Krespo's Mangum Exordium, stirring the slorq vats, cleaning the lard filters, sweeping up the escaped tiddles. Plenty of work for any man's lifetime. Jack had busted his hump like a shemp to earn his current pension (the hump was just now recovering; it didn't wander so bad like it used to), and Jack knew that unlike the lazy young and fecund time-eaters and space-sprawlers whom he shared his cheapjack building with, he truly deserved his union stipend, all 500 crones per moon (except once a year, during the Short Thirteenth, when he only got 495). Why, it had taken him a whole year of retirement just to forget the sound of the tiddles crying out for mercy. Deadly core-piercing, that noise was, by Saint Fistula's Nose!

But now, having survived the rigors of the Exordium (not all his buddies had lived to claim their Get-gone Get-by; why, his pal Slam Slap could still be seen as a screaming bas-relief in the floor tiles of Chamber 409), Jack could take life slow and easy. During daylight hours, he could loll around his bachelor-unclean flat (chittering dustbunnies prowling from couch to cupboard; obscurantist buildup on the windows, sulfur-yellow sweatcrust on the inside, pinky-grey smogma on the outside), quaffing his Anonymous Brand Bitterberry Slumps (2 crones per sixpack, down at Batu Truant's Package Parlor) and watching the televised Motorball games. Lookit that gracefully knurltopped Dean Tesh play, how easily he scored, like a regular Kuykendall Canton pawpaw!

Ignoring his master's excited rumbles and despairing whoops, Motherway the steel-colored bonedog would lie peacefully by the side of Jack's slateslab chair, mostly droop-eyed and snore-birthing, occasionally emitting a low growl directed at a more-than-usually daring dustbunny, the bonedog's acutely articulated leathery wings reflexively snickersnacking in stifled pursuit.

Three times daily Motherway got his walkies. Down the four flights of badly lit, incongruently angled stairs Jack and his pet would clomber, Motherway's cloven chitin hooves scrabbling for purchase on the scarred boards. Last time down each day, Jack would pause in the lobby and check for mail. He never got anything, barring his moonly check, but it was good to clear the crumblies out of his wall-adherent mailsack. Dragoman Mr Spiffle wouldn't leave the mail if contumacious crumblies nested within Jack's fumarole-pocked personal mailsack. And Jack didn't blame him! One or two migrant crumblies a day could be dealt with--but not a whole moonly nest!

Outside on Marmoreal Boulevard, Jack and Motherway always turned left, toward Newspaper Park. Marmoreal Boulevard paralleled the Isinglass River, which gurgled and chortled in its high-banked channel directly across the Boulevard from Jack's flat. The mean and treacherous slippery river was further set off from foot and vehicle traffic by a wide promenade composed of earth-mortared butterblox and a rail of withyweave. Mostly, the promenade remained vacant of strollers. It didn't pay to get too close to the Isinglass, as more than one uncautious twitterer had discovered, when--peering curiously over the rail to goggle at the rainbowed plumduff sluicejuice pouring from the Stoltz Refinery pipes--he or she would be looped by a long suckered manipulator and pulled down to eternal aquatic slavery on the

spillichaug plantations. GAWPERS AND LOOKYLOOS, BEWARE! read the numerous signage erected by the solicitous Drudge City Constabulary.

(Boating on the Isinglass held marginally fewer risks. Why, people were still talking about the event that quickly came to be known throughout Drudge City and beyond as "Pale Captain Dough's Angling Dismay," an event that Jack had had the misfortune to witness entire from his own flat. And he had thought the squeaky pleas of the tiddles were hard to dislodge from his mind--!)

Moving down the body-and booth-crowded sidewalk with a frowsty and jangly galumph that was partially a result of his fossilized left leg and partially attributable to the chunk-heeled, needle-toed boots which compressed his tiny feet unmercifully, Jack would enjoy the passing sights and sounds and smells of his neighborhood. A pack of low-slung Cranials surged by, eliciting a snap and lunge from the umbilical-restrained Motherway. From the peddle-powered, umbrella-shielded, salted-chickpea cart operated by Mother Gimlett wafted a delectable fragrance that always convinced Jack to part with a thread or two, securing in return a greasy paper cone of crispy steaming legumes. From the door of Boris Crocodile's poured forth angular music, the familiar bent notes and goo-modulated subsonics indicating that Stinky Frankie Konk was soloing on the hookah-piped banjo. Jack would lick his bristly nodule-dotted lips, anticipating his regular visit that evening to the boisterous Beanery and Caustics Bar, where he would be served a shot of his favorite dumble-rum by affable bartender Dinky Pachinko.

On the verges of Newspaper Park, beneath the towering headline tree, Jack would let slip Motherway's umbilical, which would retract inside the bonedog's belly with a whirl and a click like a rollershade pull. Then Motherway would be off to romp with the other cavorting animals, the gilacats and sweaterbats, the tinkleslinks and slithersloths. Jack would amble over to his favorite bench, where reliably could be found Dirty Bill Brownback. Dirty Bill was more or less permanently conjoined with his bench, the man's indiscriminate flesh mated with the porously acquisitive material of the seat. Surviving all weathers and seasons, subsisting on a diet scrounged from the trashcan placed conveniently at his elbow, Dirty Bill boasted cobwebbed armpits and crumbly-infested trousers, but was nonetheless an affable companion. Functioning as a center of fresh gossip and rumors, news and notions, Dirty Bill nevertheless always greeted Jack Neck with the same stale jibe.

"Hey, Neck, still wearing those cellbug togs? Can't you afford better on your GGGB?"

True, Jack Neck's outfit went unchanged from one moon to the next. His ivory-and-ash-striped shirt and identically patterned leggings were the official workwear of his union, the MMMM, or Mangum Maulers Monitoring Moiety, and Jack's body had grown accustomed to the clothes through his long employment. Of course, the clothes had also grown accustomed to Jack's body, fusing in irregular lumpy seams and knobbly patches to his jocund, rubicund, moribund flesh. That was just the way it went these days, in the midst of the Indeterminate. The stability of the Boredom was no more. Boundaries were flux-prone, cause-and-effect ineffectual, and forms not distinct from ideations. You soon got used to the semi-regular chaos, though, even if, like Jack, you had been born 'way back in the Boredom.

With the same predictability exhibited by Dirty Bill (human social vapidness remained perhaps the most stable force in the Indeterminate), Jack would consistently reply, "Happens I fancy these orts, Dirty Bill. And they fancy me!"

With a chuckle and a snaggletooth snigger, Dirty Bill would pat the bench beside him and offer, "Sit a spell then, neckless Jack Neck --not too long though, mind you!-- and I'll fill you in on my latest gleanings. That is, if you'll share a salty chickpea or two!"

"Gladly, you old plank-ass!" Diverting as the perpetual Motorball Tournaments on television were, Jack relished simple human intercourse. So while Motherway chased six-legged squirrels (all four of the

mature bonedog's feet an inch or two off the ground; only bonedog pups could get much higher), Jack and Dirty Bill would confab the droogly minutes away.

After his supper each night--commonly a pot of slush-slumgullion or a frozen precooked bluefish fillet heated in the hellbox, whichever being washed down with a tankard of Smith's Durian Essence--Jack would leave Motherway behind to lick doggy balls and umbilical while the bonedog's master made his visit to Boris Crocodile's. There on his reserved barstool, while empty-eyed Nori Nougat danced the latest fandango or barcarole with beetle-browed Zack Zither, Jack Neck would nod his own disproportionate head in time to the querulous squeegeeing of Stinky Frankie Konk and affirm to all who would pay any heed to the elderly GGGB-er, "Yessir, assuming you can get through the rough spots, life can turn out mighty sweet!"

But all that, of course, was before the advent of the Worrybird.

That fateful morning dawned nasty, low-hanging hieratic skies and burnt-toast clouds, an ugly odor like all the rain-drenched lost stuffed-toys of childhood seeping in from the streets. Upon opening first his good left eye, then his bad right ('twasn't the eye itself that was dodgy, but only the nacreous cheek-carbuncle below it that was smooshing the orb closed), Jack Neck experienced a ripe intestinal feeling telling him he should stay in bed. Just huddle up 'neath his checkerboard marshmallow quilt, leaving his beleathered feet safe in the grooves they had worn in the milkweed-stuffed mattress. Yes, that seemed just the safest course on a day like today, so pawky and slyboots.

But the allure of the common comforts awaiting him proved stronger than his intuition. Why, today was a Motorball matchup made in heaven! The Chlorine Castigators versus Dame Middlecamp's Prancers! And then there was Motherway to be walked, Dirty Bill's dishy yatterings, that Dinky-Pachinko-poured tot of dumble-rum to welcome midnight in. Surely nothing mingy nor mulcting would befall him, if he kept to his established paths and habits....

So out of his splavined cot old bunion-rumped Jack Neck poured himself, heavy hump leading Lady Gravity in an awkward pavane. Once standing, with minor exertions Jack managed to hitch his hump around, behind and upward to a less unaccommodatingly exigent position. Then he essayed the palpable trail midst the debris of his domicile that led to the bathroom.

As soon as Jack entered the WC, he knew his vague forebodings had been spot on. But it was now too late to return to the safety of his blankets. For Jack saw with dismay that out of his chipped granite commode, like a baleful excremental spirit, there arose a Smoking Toilet Puppet.

The rugose figure was composed of an elongated mud-colored torso, sprouting two boneless and sinuous claw-fingered arms, and topped by a ruttled warpy face. The Puppet's head was crowned by a small fumey crater, giving its kind their name.

"Ja-a-ack," wailed the Puppet. "Jack Neck! Step closer! I have a message for you."

Jack knew that although the creature might indeed have a valid and valuable delphic message for him, to heed the Puppet's summons was to risk being abducted down to the gluck-mucky Septic Kingdom ruled by Baron Sugarlinger. So with an uncommon burst of energy, Jack grabbed up a wood-hafted sump-plunger and whanged the Puppet a good one on its audacious incense-dispensing bean.

While the Puppet was clutching its abused noggin and sobbing most piteously, Jack stepped around it and flushed. Widdershins and downward swirled the invader, disappearing with a liquidly dopplering "Nooooooooo--!"

Jack did his old man's business quickly while the runnels still gurgled, then lowered the heavy toilet lid against further home invasions. He stepped to the sink and the sweatcrusted mirror above it, where he flaked scales off his reflection. He shaved his forehead, restoring the pointy dimensions of his once-stylish hairline, plucked some eelgrass out of his ears, lacquered his carbuncle, and congratulated himself on meeting so forcefully the first challenge of the day. If nothing else adventured, he would be polly-with-a-lolly!

Back through the bedroom and out into his sitting sanctuary, where Motherway lay snoozily on his fulsome scrap of Geelvink carpet. Approaching the dirty window that looked out upon Marmoreal Boulevard and the Isinglass, the incautious and overoptimistic Jack Neck threw open the wormy sash and shouldered forward, questing additional meaning and haruspices from the day.

And that was precisely the moment the waiting Worrybird chose to land talon-tight upon the convenient perch of Jack's hapless hump!

Jack yelped and with an instinctive yet hopeless shake of his hump withdrew into the refuge of his apartment, thinking to disconcert and dislodge the Worrybird by swift maneuvers. But matters had already progressed beyond any such simple solution. The Worrybird was truly and determinedly ensconced, and Jack realized he was doomed.

Big as a turkey, with crepe-like vulture wings, the baldy Worrybird possessed a dour human face exhibiting the texture of ancient overwaxed linoleum, and exuded a stench like burning crones. Jack had seen the ominous parasites often, of course, riding on their wan, slumpy victims. But never had he thought to be one such!

Awakened by the foofraraw, Motherway was barking and leaping and snapping, frantically trying to drive the intruder off. But all the bonedog succeeded in doing was gouging his master's single sensible leg with his hooves. Jack managed to calm the bonedog down, although Motherway continued to whimper while anxiously fidgeting.

Now the Worrybird craned its paste-pallid pug-ugly face around on its long sebaceous neck to confront Jack. It opened its hideous rubbery mouth and intoned a portentous phrase.

"Never again, but not yet!"

Jack threw himself into his slateslab chair, thinking to crush the grim bird, but it leaped nimbly atop Jack's skull. By Saint Foraminifer's Liver, those scalp-digging claws hurt! Quickly Jack stood, preferring to let the bird roost on his hump. Obliginglly, the Worrybird shifted back.

"Oh, Motherway," Jack implored, "what a fardelicious grievance has been construed upon us! What oh what are we to do?"

Motherway made inutile answer only by a plangent sympathetic whuffle.

The first thought to form in the anxious mind of bird-bestridden Jack Neck was that he should apply to the local Health Clinic run by the Little Sisters of Saint Farquahar. Surely the talented technicians and charity caregivers there would have a solution to his grisly geas! (Although at the back of his mind loomed the pessimistic question, perhaps Worrybird implanted, Why did anyone suffer from Worrybird-itis if removal of same were so simple?)

So, leaving Motherway behind to guard the apartment from any further misfortunes which this inopportune day might bring, Jack and his randomly remonstrative rider ("Never again, but not yet!")

clabbered down the four flights of slant stairs to the street.

Once on Marmoreal (where formerly friendly or neutral neighbors now winced and retreated from sight of his affliction), Jack turned not happy-wise left but appointment-bound right. At the intersection of the Boulevard and El Chino Street, he wambled south on the cross-street. Several blocks down El Chino his progress was arrested by the sloppy aftermath of an accident: a dray full of Smith's Durian Essence had collided with one loaded with Walrus Brand Brochettes. The combination of the two antagonistic spilled foodstuffs had precipitated something noxious: galorping mounds of quivering dayglo cartiplasm that sought to ingest any flesh within reach. (The draft-animals, a brace of Banana Slugs per dray, had already succumbed, as had the blindly argumentative drivers, one Pheon Ploog and a certain Elmer Sourbray.)

Responding with the nimble reflexes and sassy footwork expected from any survivor of Drudge City's ordinary cataclysms, Jack dodged into a nearby building, rode a Recirculating Transport Fountain upward and took a wayward rooftop path around the crisis before descending, all the while writing a hundred times on the blackboard of his mind an exclamation-punctuated admonition never to mix internally his favorite supertime drink with any iota of Walrus Brand Brochettes.

Encountering no subsequent pandygandy, Jack Neck and his foul avian passenger arrived at the Health Clinic on Laguna Diamante Way. Once inside, he was confronted with the stern and ruleacious face of Nurse Gwendolyn Hindlip, Triage Enforcement Officer. From behind her rune-carven desk that seemed assembled of poorly chosen driftwood fragments, Nurse Gwendolyn sized up Jack and his hump-burden, then uttered a presumptuous pronouncement.

"You might as well kill yourself now, you old mummer, and free up your GGGB for a younkling!"

Jack resented being called a mummer--a mildly derisive slang term derived from his union's initials--almost more than he umbrigated at the suicidal injunction.

"Shut up, you lava-faced hincty harridan! Just take my particulars, slot my citizen-biscuit into the chewer, and mind your own business!"

Nurse Gwendolyn sniffed with bruised emotionality. Jack had scored a mighty blow on a tender spot with his categorical comment "lava-faced." For Nurse Gwendolyn's scare-making and scarified visage did indeed reflect her own childhood brush with a flesh-melting disease that still occasionally plagued Drudge City. Known as Trough'n'Slough, the nonfatal disease left its victims with a stratified trapunto epidermis. Nurse Gwendolyn forever attributed her sour old-maidhood to the stigma of this pillowpuff complexion, although truth be told, her vile tongue had even more to do with her empty bed.

Snuffling aggrievedly, Nurse Gwendolyn now did as she was bade, at last dispatching a newly ID-braceleted Jack to a waiting area with the final tart remark, "You'll surely have a long uncomfortable wait, Mr Neck, for many and more seriously afflicted--yet naytheless with a better prognosis--are the helpseekers afore you!"

Coercing his fossil leg into the waiting room, Jack saw that Nurse Gwendolyn had not been merely flibbering. Ranked and stacked in moaning drifts and piles were a staggering assortment of Drudge City's malfunctioners. Jack spotted many a one showing various grades of Maskelyne's Curse, in which the face assumed the characteristics of a thickly blurred latex mold of the actual submerged features beneath. The false countenance remained connected by sensory tendrils, yet was migratory, so that one's visage slopped about like warm jello, eyes peeking from nostrils or ears, nose poking from mouth. Other patients showed plain signs of Exoskeletal Exfoliation, their limbs encased in osteoclastic armor. One woman--dressed in a tattered shift laterally patterned blue and gold--could only be host to Dolly Dwindles Syndrome: as she approached over months her ultimate doll-like dimensions, her face

simultaneously grew more lascivious in a ghoulish manner.

Heaving a profound sigh at the mortal sufferings of himself and his fellows, Jack sat himself saggingly down in a low-backed chair that permitted the Worrybird to maintain its grip upon Jack's hump, and resigned himself to a long wait.

On the seven-hundredth-and-forty-ninth "Never again, but not yet!", Jack's name was called. He arose and was conducted to a cubicle screened from an infinity of others by ripped curtains the color of old tartar sauce. Undressing was not an option, so he simply plopped down on a squelchy examining table and awaited the advent of a healer. Before too long the curtains parted and a lab-coated figure entered.

This runcible-snouted doctor himself, thought Jack, should have been a patient, for he was clearly in an advanced state of Tessellated Scale Mange, as evidenced by alligatored wrists and neck poking from cuff and collar. Most horribly, the medico dragged behind him a long ridged tail, ever-extending like an accumulating stalactite from an infiltrated organ at the base of the spine.

"Doctor Weighbend," said the professional in a confident voice, extending a crocodile paw. Jack shook hands happily, liking the fellow's vim. But Doctor Weighbend's next question shattered Jack's sanguinity.

"Now, what seems to be the matter with you, Mr Neck?"

"Why--why, Doc, there's an irksome and grotty Worrybird implacably a-sway upon my tired old hump!"

Doctor Weighbend made a suave dismissive motion. "Oh, that. Since there's no known cure for the Worrybird, Mr Neck, I assumed there was another issue to deal with, some unseen plaque or innervation perhaps."

"No known cure, Doc? How can that be?"

Doctor Weighbend cupped his dragonly chin. "The Worrybird has by now slyly and inextricably mingled his Akashic Aura with yours. Were we to kill or even remove the little vampire-sparrow, you too would perish. Of course, you'll perish eventually anyway, as the lachrymose-lark siphons off your vitality. But that process could take years and years. 'Never again will you smile, but not yet shall you die.' That's the gist of it, I fear, Mr Neck."

"What--what do you recommend then?"

"Many people find some small palliation in building a festive concealing shelter for their Worrybird. Securely strapped to your torso bandolier-style and gaily decorated with soothing icons, it eases social functioning to a small degree. Now, I have other patients to attend to, if you'll permit me to take my leave by wishing you a minimally satisfactory rest of your life."

Doctor Weighbend spun around--his massive tail catching a cart of instruments and beakers and sending glassware smashing to the floor--and was gone. Jack sat wearily and down-in-the-dumpily for a few long minutes, then levered himself up and trudged off down the aisle formed by the curtained wards.

Almost to the exit, Jack's attention was drawn between two parted drapes.

On a table lay the Motorball Champion Dean Tesh! Bloodied and grimacing, his signature cornucopia-shaped head drooping, sparks and fizzles spurting from his numerous lumpy adjuncts, Jack Neck's hero awaited his own treatment. Assuredly, that day's game had been a rumbunctious and asgardian fray! And Jack had missed it!

Impulsively, Jack entered the Champion's cubicle. "Superlative Dean Tesh, if I may intrude briefly upon your eminence. I'm one of your biggest fans, and I wish to offer my condolences on your lapsarian desuetude."

Dean Tesh boldly smiled like the rigorous roughrider he was. "'Tis nothing, really, old mummenschanz. Once they jimmy open my cranial circuit flap and insert a few new wigwags, I'll be right as skysyrup!"

Jack blushed to be addressed by his union's highest title, in actuality undeserved. "Your magnificent spirit inspires me, lordly Dean Tesh! Somehow I too will win through my own malediction!"

Dean Tesh's ocular lenses whirred for a better look. "Worrybird, is it? I've heard Uncle Bradley has a way with them."

"Uncle Bradley! Of course! Did he not design your own world-renowned servos and shunts? If medicine holds no answers to my problem, then surely Uncle Bradley's Syntactical Fibroid Engineering must!"

And so bidding Dean Tesh a heartfelt farewell replete with benisonical affirmations of the Champion's swift recovery, Jack Neck set out for Cementville.

Soon Jack's trail of tiny archless footprints--outlined in fast-growing sporulating molds and luminescent quiverslimes--could be traced through many an urban mile. Behind him already lay the evil precincts of Barrio Garmi, where the Stilt-legged Spreckles were prone to drop rotten melons from their lofty vantages upon innocent passersby. Jack had with wiles and guiles eluded that sloppy fate. The district of Clovis Points he had also cunningly circumnavigated, wrenching free at the last possible moment from the tenebrous grasp of a pack of Shanghai Liliths, whose lickerish intention it was to drag innocent Jack to their spraddle-skirted leader, Lil' Omen, for the irreligious ceremony known as the Ecstatic Excruciation. For several blocks thereafter he had dared to ride the Henniker Avenue Slantwise Subway, disembarking hastily through his car's emergency exit and thence by escape-ready ladder-chute when he spotted a blockade across the tracks surely erected by the muskageous minions of Baron Sugarlinger. Luckily, Jack had had the foresight to obtain a transfer-wafer and so was able to board the Baba Wanderly Aerial Viaticum for free, riding high and safe above the verdigrised-copper-colored towers and chimney-pots, gables and garrets of Doo-Boo-Kay Flats.

At last, as a pavonine dusk was o'erspreading the haze-raddled, swag-bellied firmament, Jack Neck and his endlessly asseverating Worrybird--its face like a hairless druid's, its folded wings gloomy as a layoff notice from Krespo's--arrived at the premises of Uncle Bradley. The largest employer in gritty Cementville, the firm of Bradley and His Boyo-Boys, experts in SFE, ran round the erratic clock all thirteen moons a year, turning out many and many a marvelous product, both luxuries and essentials, the former including Seductive Bergamot Filters and the latter notable for Nevermiss Nailguns. Renowned for accepting any and all engineering challenges, the more intractable the more alluring, Uncle Bradley represented Jack's best hope in the Worrybird-Removal Department.

At the towering portal to the lumbering and rachitic nine-storey algae-brick-fronted manufactory that occupied ten square blocks of Dimmig Gardens, Jack made free with the bellpull: the nose of a leering brass jackanapes. A minidoor opened within the gigundo pressboard entrance, and a functionary appeared. As the employee began to speak, Jack noted with dismay that the fellow suffered from Papyrus Mouth: his words emerged not as ordinary vocables but as separate words printed in bleasome bodily inks upon shoddy scraps of organic-tissue paper.

Jack sought to catch the emergent syllables as they spelunked buccally forth, but some eluded him and whiffed away on the diddling breezes. Nervously assembling the remaining message, Jack read: business state Bradley please with.

"I need to solicit dear Uncle Bradley's genius in the area of invasive parasite disengagement." Jack jerked a thick split-nailed thumb backward at his broodsome rider.

A gush of flighty papyri: Follow Bradley Uncle free see if me.

Most gladly, Jack Neck entered the dynamic establishment and strode after the Papyrus Mouter. Through humming, thrumming offices and sparky workshops--where crucibles glowed with neon-tinted polymeric compounds and, under the nimble fingers of Machine Elves, transistors danced the Happy Chicken Trot with capacitors and optical-fluid valves--Jack and his guide threaded, until at last they stood before a ridged and fumarole-pocked door with a riveted steel rubric announcing it as UNCLE BRADLEY'S CARBON CAVE.

Wait here.

Alone, Jack hipper-hopped nervously from toe to toe. He prayed to all the Saints whose names he could remember--Fimbule and Flubber, Flacken and Floss, Fluffie and Farina--that Uncle Bradley possessed the secret of his salvation--and at a price he could afford.

After an almost unsquingeable wait, the Papyrus Mouter returned.

with Bradley will now you Uncle meet.

"Oh, thank you, kind underling! A myriad blessings of the Yongy-bongy-bo descend upon you!"

Into the fabled Hades-embered Carbon Cave now, whose inward-seeming rattled Jack's sensory modes. The walls and ceiling of the vasty deep were layered with snivelling encrustations of Syntactical Fibroid Engineering at its most complex. Flickering readouts and mumbling speaker-grilles obtruded their cicatrice-bordered surfaces from amongst switches and pulls, toggles and knife-throws, fingering-holes and mentation-bands. Innumerable crystal monitors studded all surfaces, displaying upon their garnet and amethyst faces scenes from across Drudge City. For a briefer-than-brief second, a shot of Marmoreal Boulevard--right in front of Boris Crocodile's!--flashed across one, and Jack nearly wept for the nostalgic past of mere yesterday!

In the middle of the Carbon Cave, on his numinous, numbly throne, sat Uncle Bradley. Almost totally overwhelmed with layers of SFE extrudements, a helpful carapace of gadgetry, the master of the Boyo-Boys showed bare only his snaggle-toothed and wildly inventive face, and his two striped arms, one of which terminated in chromium piratical hook. Dangling all around inspiration-eyed Uncle Bradley were speakers and microphones, mini-monitors, telefactored manipulators and sniff-sources, allowing him to run his many-branched enterprise without leaving his cozy sanctum.

As Jack approached tentatively across the wide checkerboard floor, he could hear from Uncle Bradley a constant stream of queries, advice and commands.

"Lay on ten thousand more karma-watts to the Soul Furnace! Process Violet-Hundred is failing? Six hundred kilograms of Charm Catalyst into the mix! Eureka! Start a new assembly line: personal Eyeblink Moderators! Has the Bloodwort stabilized yet? No? Lash it with the Zestful Invigorators! Cancel the Corndog Project, and feed the experimental subjects to the Hullygees! How are the Pull Hats selling this season? That poorly? Try them with claw-tassels in plaid!"

Jack and his momentarily silent Worrybird had reached the base of Uncle Bradley's seat of power, and now the edisonical eminence took notice of the supplicant. Before Jack could even state his need, Uncle Bradley, laying a machicolated salesman's smile upon him, was offering a concise prix-fixe of options.

"Worrybird, correct? Of course! Obviousness obtrudes! Here are your recoursical tactics, in order of cost and desirability. For five thousand crones, we inject the bird with a Circuitry Virus. In three days the bird is totally roboticized. Still unremovable, of course, but its lethality is slowed by fifty percent. For three thousand crones, we attach a Secondary Imagineer to your cerebrumal interstices. You promptly forget the bird is there for the rest of your allotted span. For eight hundred crones, a simple cable allows you to share the bird's own mentation. Thus you enjoy your own death, and feel it to be darwinically mandated. Lastly, for a piddling three hundred crones, we remand one of our novice Boyo-Boys to stay by your side till you succumb to the inevitable wastage. He plys you with personalized jest and frolic, and remonstrates with anyone who dares to offer you contumely!"

Jack could barely conceal his dismay. "Those--those are my only choices?"

"What more could a sensible man want? The Worrybird is an incorrigible opponent, and no one besides the recondite and rascally Uncle Bradley dares even to tamper with one! Be quick now, old gansel! Which will it be?"

Jack wimble and wamble pitifully. "I have not even the three hundred crones for the humblest palliation. I was hoping for more triumphalist affronts and easier terms--"

"What! You dare to waste Uncle's invaluable chronospasms without funds in reserve! And then to derogate my nostrums as if you were a fellow engineer at a throwdown session of the Tinkerer's Sodality! Away with you, laggardly old momerath!"

Suddenly, the Papyrus Mouter was by Jack's elbow. Without pleasant hostly ado, Jack was spun about and frog-marched from the Cave of the SFERical Monarch. Just before the heavy door slammed behind him, Jack could hear Uncle Bradley resume his litany of savantical willfulness: "Engage the services of ten thousand more Glissandos, and another dozen Kriegsteins!"

Summarily and insultively ejected onto the cheesily porous cobbled terrace before the SFERical Emporium, true night pressing down from above like a corpulent lover, Jack knew himself at the end of both his abilities and the universe's possibilities. The weight of the Worrybird seemed suddenly Atlasian. At the first "Never again, but not yet!", every nerve in Jack's poor frame thrilled with galvanic imbroglication. He hung his head, able to focus only on the snailslick cobbles.

Three tags of payrus skittered by just then, and without much hope Jack used the last of his scanty vigor to retrieve them.

Seek Saint Fiacre.

Now was veracious and lordly midnight come without fear of fleering misrecognition to occupy Drudge City like a famously conquering cubic khan. Much too low in the sky hung a sherberty scoop-hollowed partial moon like a slice of vanilla-icecream-sheened cantaloupe half-eaten by a finicky godling. Stars shown in the space between the tips of the errant satellite's horns. Insect-seeking sweaterbats, their calls of "stitch-stitch!" leavening the mist, thronged the curvaceous canyons formed by the tottering towers of home and office, both kinds of hobbledehoy establishment darkened as their inhabitants blissfully or troubledly slept. Only meeps and monks, strumpets and troubadors, witlings and mudlarks were abroad at this hour--at least in this dismal section of Drudge City. Perhaps among the delightful theaters in the district known as Prisbey's Heaves, or in the saucer-slurping cafes of Mechanics' Ramble, good citizens yet disported themselves without fear of encountering lurking angina-anklers or burrow-bums. And surely--most sadly of a certainty--at Boris Crocodile's Beanery and Caustics Bar, ghosty-eyed Nori Nougat was even at this moment frugging with ledge-browed Zack Zither, while Stinky Frankie Konk tortured banshee wails from his hybrid instrument.

But out here, where putrid Ashmolean Alley and rancid Rotifer Gangway ranked as the only streets of distinction, no such gaiety could be found. There lolloped only a besmirched and bedaubed and bedemoned Jack Neck, bustedly dragging himself down block after block, in search of Saint Fiacre.

The last Jack had heard--from Dirty Bill Brownback, in fact--rumors of a Saint sighting had recently wafted from out Ubidio way. No guarantee that said sighted Saint was named Fiacre, or that he was even still present. Saints had a disconcerting propensity to phase-shift at random. Yet poor Jack Neck had no other phantom to pursue, so thence he now leathered.

Two hours past the night's navel, Jack Neck emerged from encircling buildings onto bare-tiled Pringle Plaza. In the middle of the civic space ruminated an eyelid-shuttered naked Saint.

The Saint had once been human. After much spiritual kenning and abstemious indulgences, making the choice to give him or herself up entirely to the avariciously bountiful forces of the Indeterminate, the human had morpholyzed into a Saint. The Saint's trunk had widened and spread into a bulbous heap, from which sprouted withered legs and off-kilter arms, but no visible generative parts. Instead, out of the trunk at queer angles protruded numerous quasi-organic spouts and intakes similar to rusty gutter-pipes. The Saint's neck was a corded barrel supporting a pointy-peaked head on which the features had wandered north, south, east and west. Overall, the creature was a pebbled mushroom-white, and three times the size of Jack. Around this living interface with the Indeterminate, the air wavered whorlfully.

Humble as a wet cat, Jack approached the Saint. When the Worrybird-carrier was within a few yards of the strange being, the Saint opened his eyes.

"Are thee Fiacre?" nervously intoned Jack, who had never cozened with a Saint before, nor ever thought to.

"Aye."

"I was sent to thee. This bumptious bird I would begone."

The Saint pondered for a chronospasm. "You must perambulate round the Inverted Stupa for three hours, reciting without cease, 'Always once again, and perhaps now.'"

"This will cause the Worrybird to relinquish its hold?"

"Not at all. The procedure will simply give me further time to peer into the Indeterminate. But nonetheless, you must attend with precision to my instructions, upon pain of rasterbation."

"As you say, oh Saint."

Luckily, the Inverted Stupa was only half a league onward. Hurrying with renewed hope, Jack soon reached the famous monument. In the middle of another peopleless plaza, lit fitfully by torches of witch's-hair, was a railed pit of no small dimensions. Looking down over the rail, Jack saw the vertiginous walls of the Inverted Stupa, lighted windows stretching down to the earth's borborygmous bowels, deeper by far than even Baron Sugarslinger's realm.

Without delay, Jack began his circular hegira, chanting his Saintly mantra.

"Always once again, and perhaps now. Always once again, and perhaps now...."

The Worrybird seemed in no wise discommoded by Jack's croaking exertions. Jack tried not to lose his resurgent tentative cheer. At long last, just when Jack's legs--both good and bad--felt ready to snap, a nearby clock tolled five, releasing him to return to the Saint.

Saint Fiacre sat unchanged, a yeasty enigmatic effigy with a face like an anthropomorphic cartoon breadloaf.

"You have done well, old mockmurphy. Come close now, and cover my sacred Intake Number Nine with your palm."

Jack sidle-stepped up to the Saint, entering the zone where his vision burbled. He raised his hand toward the properly labelled bodypipe, then capped the opening with the flat of his permanently work-roughened hand.

Instantly, the insidious and undeniable vacuum-suck of ten dozen black holes!

Jack's hand was quickly pulled in. Before he could even gasp, his shoulder was pressed to the treacherous Intake Number Nine. Then Jack felt himself drawn even further in! Oddly he experienced no pain. Only, he was sure, because he was already dead.

Soon Jack was ingulped headwise up to both shoulders. His hump delayed his swallowment slightly, but then, thanks to a swelling surge of pull-power, even his abused hump was past the rim.

And the Worrybird too? Apparently not! Peeled off like a potato skin was that manfaced mordaunt! But what of their commingled Akashic Aura? Only Gossip Time would tell....

Within seconds, Jack was fully through Intake Number Nine. Then began a journey of sense-thwarting intricacy. Through a maze of bloodlit veiny pipes Jack flowed like the slorq at Krespo's, until he finally shot out of a funnel-mouth into ultracolored drifts of sheer abundant nothingness that smelled like a bosomy woman and tasted like Shugwort's Lemon Coddle. Here existence was a matter of wayward wafts and dreamy enticements, so connubially unlike the pestiferous hurlyburly of mundane existence. Time evaporated, and soon Jack did too....

Early morning in Pringle Plaza, sunlight like the drip of candyapple glaze. Sanitation chimps were about their cleaning, sweeping litter and leaf into the open mouths of attendant roadhogs. A traveling preacher had unfolded his pocket altar and was preaching the doctrine of Klacktovedsedsteen to a yawning group of bow-tied office dandies. Saint Fiacre, having just given a lonely little girl the second head she had requested, suddenly quivered all over as if stricken by Earthquake Ague, then decocted a real-as-mud, sprightly-as-fleas Jack Neck from Outflow Number Three.

Jack got woozily to his tiny feet. "Saint Fiacre, I thank thee!"

"Say twenty-seven Nuclear Novenas nightly, invoking the names of Gretchen Growl, Mercy Luna and the Rowrbazzle. And do not stick your foolish mummer's head out any more windows without forethought."

And then Saint Fiacre was gone.

Having polished off his supper and seen the merry Motherway lickily attending to his bonedog privates, mawkly old Jack Neck now commonly got to Boris Crocodile's a little later each night. Those Nuclear Novenas took time, and he did not trust either his tongue or his pledged determination after a shot of Dinky Pachinko's dumble-rum. Neither could his saviorology be allowed to interfere during the day with Jack's ardent eyeballing of the exploits of the mighty Dean Tesh, Motorball Mauler! So postprandial were his doxologies.

But despite the slight change in his schedule, Jack still entered the Beanery and Caustics Bar in mid-stridulation of hookah-banjo, still found his favorite reserved barstool awaiting him, still feasted his

rheumy eyes on the flirtsome gavotteners atrot, and still affirmed to any and all who would lend an ear,
"Yessir, assuming you can get through the rough spots, life can turn out mighty sweet!"

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