

Nucleon

David D. Levine

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David D. Levine (www.spiritone.com/~dlevine/) and his wife Kate Yule live in Seattle and publish the SF fanzine Bento. His nonfiction writing includes "Why Usenet Is Like a Penis" and "Just Another Day on the Microsoft Barney Help Line." "Truly we are living in the End Times," he says. He attended the Clarion West SF Writing Workshop in 2000, and began to publish stories in 2001. He won a second prize in the Writer of the Future contest in the second quarter of that year, and this story won the 2001 James White Award (a short story competition open to nonprofessional writers and decided by an international panel of judges, for which the winner gets "a check and a trophy to keep and the winning story is also published in Interzone, Europe's leading magazine of speculative fiction"). He says, "Despite the science-fictional premise, the story turned out a gentle fantasy, a variation on the well-known "mystery shop" trope. I have often had my hard science fiction ideas turn into fantasy..."

"Nucleon" is a fantasy story in the Unknown Worlds tradition. That fine magazine introduced contemporary urban settings into fantasy fiction. The "mystery shop" tradition includes such classic stories as "What You Need" by Henry Kuttner. "Nucleon" is a worthy addition to this tradition.

"Tatyrzinski," he said, extending his hand. "Karel Tatyrzinski." His blue eyes sparkled under bushy white eyebrows, set in a round pink face. Wispy white hair tried, and failed, to cover a shiny pink scalp. That clean pink and white head emerged from the world's grimmest coverall. It was a fascinating contrast; I thought he'd make a great colored-pencil sketch. I liked him immediately.

I took the hand and shook it. "Pleased to meet you, Mr. Tat...um..."

"Tatter-zin-ski," he repeated. "Call me Carl. What are you looking for, Mr...?"

"James. Phil James. It's kind of difficult to explain. I'll know it when I see it."

"Well," he said, extending his hands to encompass the piles of objects all around him, "whatever it is, I've got it." I was inclined to believe him.

STUFF FOR SALE read the sign above the gate, matching the one-line listing in the Yellow Pages that had led me to this place. It was way, way off the beaten path; I was glad I'd called ahead for directions.

The name was apt. A stolid 1920s Craftsman-style house, with an unfortunate skin condition of yellow 1970s asphalt shingles, sat in the middle of piles and piles of...stuff. Heaps of sinks. Stacks of televisions. Three barrels of shoes. File cabinets labeled **CHAINS, DOORKNOBS, ALTERNATORS. A**

haphazard-looking structure of pipes and blue plastic sheeting kept the rain off the more fragile pieces, but a row of toilets standing by the fence wore beards of moss. The piles went on and on...he must have had at least a couple of acres. Through a window I saw that the house was just as crowded inside.

"I'm a commercial artist," I explained. "I'm doing a series of illustrations I call 'junklets'—gadgets made of junk. It's for a new ad campaign. The company wants to show how innovative and inventive it is. So what I need is stuff that looks interesting, things I can put together with other things in my pictures. It doesn't matter what it is, or whether or not it works." I pulled my digital camera out of my coat pocket. "Actually, all I need is reference photos. But I can pay you for your time."

"No need. I'm always glad to help an artist." He rubbed his chin with a grime-encrusted hand. The work-hardened skin scratched against his beard stubble. "Lessee. I think I had some old dentist equipment..." Suddenly he burst into motion and I had to scramble to keep up.

Down an alley of refrigerators, right turn at an old monitor-top Frigidaire, hard left at an ancient glass-fronted Coke machine, and there we were at a barrel of dental drills from the early 1900s. All joints and cables and black crinkle-finish metal struts, it looked like a family reunion of daddy-longlegs. "This is great!" I said. I snapped a dozen pictures of the barrel just as it stood, then asked him to haul out a few choice pieces for closer examination. I wanted dozens of jointed arms for my Shoe-Tying Machine, and these would be perfect. "What else have you got that's like this? Mechanical. Early Twentieth-Century stuff."

"Hmm. Follow me." And he was off again, past racks of doors and windows, with me trailing in his wake. A moment later he was lifting a blue tarp from a huge shelving unit, revealing ranks of radios: streamlined Bakelite Emersons, shiny chrome Bendixes, squat, blocky Motorolas. A harvest of design from the '20s to the '50s.

"These are phenomenal! I love old radios!"

"Most of 'em don't work anymore, I'm afraid..."

"I don't care." I picked up a sleek Emerson from the '30s. The original ivory finish had yellowed, but it was in gorgeous shape. "They just don't design things like this anymore. How much do you want for it?"

"Twenty-five. Naah, make it twenty-two fifty."

"I'll take it." I tucked the radio under my arm. "But. These are too...unitary. For my junklets I need parts. Moving parts."

"I know just the thing." He zipped through a gap between two piles of tires. Juggling the radio and my camera, I followed as best I could.

The entire afternoon went like that. I filled the camera's memory—over 300 images—and wound up taking home two boxes of stuff as well. Not that I needed any of it, not that I had room for any of it, but it was all just fabulous. How could I leave this keen little eggbeater behind? I'd never seen another one like it. I put most of my finds on my knick-knack shelves as soon as I got home.

After dinner I transferred the pictures into my computer, then started sorting, organizing, and cogitating. The hydraulic cylinder from the old forklift could support the seat of that office chair, and I could pull in the control panel from the red generator as well. By the time I reluctantly shut down at 3 AM I had images for a dozen junklets sorted into folders.

Bright and early the next day—by which I mean noon—I booted up my computer again and put a big

newsprint pad on my drawing board. All afternoon I sketched, popping up images on the monitor whenever I needed reference or inspiration. Most of my friends think I'm weird, using paper and pencil to draw images from a computer screen, but it works for me. I've never been comfortable drawing with a mouse or a stylus, but managing reference photos with a computer beats shuffling piles of prints.

Three days later I was back at **STUFF FOR SALE** again. "Carl, the pictures I got last time were great. I need some more. What have you got that's big and flat and heavy and goes around?"

"What, like an old record player?"

"Yeah, but bigger."

"I think I might have something for you." He took me to a huge rotating platform, must have weighed a ton, made of rusty waffle-patterned iron. Neither of us could figure out what it had originally been used for, but it would be a perfect base for my Plastering Machine. While we were clearing some mannequins out of the way so I could get far enough back for a good photo, the bell on the front gate rang. "Scuse me while I tend to a paying customer," Carl said.

"Take your time," I replied. "I can look around on my own." Carl vanished down a row of bookcases.

After I finished up with the platform, I wandered around. I needed a big, tubby body for the Automated Barber, some tubes and pipes for the Plant Waterer, and a whole lot of irons for the Ironing Machine. But everywhere I went, all I found was...junk. Boxy, boring washing machines. Cracked water bottles. Hundreds of olive-drab ammo cases. Rusty metal shelving. I took a picture of a row of vending machines because I thought it was a nice composition, but I didn't see anything remotely useful for my project. I was getting pretty frustrated when Carl returned.

"I haven't found anything. Where's the good stuff?"

"It's all good stuff, to the right person. What are you looking for?"

"Well, first off, something with a round, tubby body. Person-sized."

"I know just the thing." He jogged down the row of washing machines, took a left turn. "How's this?" he asked, gesturing to a bulbous chrome 1950s water cooler.

"It's perfect!" I started snapping pictures, but something nagged at me. "Wait a minute. I was just here a minute ago. I stood on this very spot and took a picture of those vending machines over there. See?" I paged back through my stored pictures, showed him the vending machines on the camera's screen. "This water cooler is just what I was looking for. Why didn't I see it before?"

"I dunno. It hasn't moved lately." Indeed, there was grass growing through the holes in its base. How could I have missed it? "Sometimes folks can't find what they're looking for even if it's right in front of them. Sometimes they need a little help. Speaking of which, can I help you find anything else?"

"Uh, yeah. Some irons. Clothes irons."

"Right over here." But as I followed, I couldn't help but look back over my shoulder at the water cooler. I would have sworn there was nothing interesting in this whole area.

I visited **STUFF FOR SALE** two more times in the next three weeks. Carl never failed to find just the gizmo, gew-gaw, or whatchamacallit I needed to complete my drawings, and I never failed to buy something. I spent over 200 dollars on old radios alone. But it was worth it. I had all the reference images I needed; I had inspiration; I was happy. I turned out more and better work in less time than I ever had since art school.

That was just the beginning. The agency loved my junklets. The client loved my junklets. The industry loved my junklets; I even got my name in Advertising Age. The client ordered a second series of junklets, then another. They used my Automated Barber as the background image on their corporate stationery.

With all that publicity, I was inundated with new clients. I soon found myself with more work than I could handle and more money than I'd ever imagined. But I knew I was just the flavor of the month; I'd seen other artists rise meteorically and then vanish just as quickly. So I got myself a financial adviser, kept my frugal lifestyle (well, mostly), and put the extra cash into mutual funds.

Everyone wanted junklets, or something like junklets. I was constantly in need of more mechanical images, more inspirations. I sometimes visited Carl three times in a week. We got to be pals.

One day we were sitting in Carl's kitchen, sharing a beer after a long hot afternoon tramping around the junkyard. "Tell me, Phil," he said, "how did you get into this crazy advertising business anyway?"

I thought about it for a moment. "I suppose you'd have to blame my dad. He was an automotive designer at Ford. When I was a kid I'd visit him at his office during the summer; he'd always let me play with his colored pencils. I guess that's where I caught the art bug."

"Ford, eh? Did your dad design anything I might have seen?"

"He was on the team that did the '66 Fairlane. But mostly he did conceptual designs. It was exciting for him to be out beyond the cutting edge like that, but he was always disappointed that none of his designs made it into actual production." I took a swig of my beer. "He worked on the Nucleon."

Carl put down his beer. "Nucleon?"

"It was a concept car for a World's Fair or something like that. A nuclear-powered car, can you believe it? Atoms for peace."

Carl got a strange look on his face then. "I have something out back that I think you ought to see."

The sun was low in the sky, casting neon-orange glints off the hoods of a row of old cars all the way at the back of the yard, where we'd seldom gone before. Bees buzzed in the shrubs that grew along the fence. Near one end of the row was a bulky shape shrouded in a moss-covered olive-drab tarp. "Help me haul this off, would you?"

We pulled off the tarp and revealed one of the strangest-looking cars you've ever seen. It looked like a cross between an old Caddy with big pointed fins and a pickup truck, and where the trunk, or pickup bed, should have been there was a big square hole that went all the way down to the ground. It looked like a car with a built-in swimming pool.

It was painted in that godawful turquoise color that was so popular in the '50s.

On the tailgate was a name in chrome script: Nucleon.

"Sonofabitch! You've got the mockup! I didn't even know they built one!"

"Take a closer look."

I looked. It was no fiberglass mockup. It was real steel, and a little rusty. The doors were scarred with parking lot dings. The tires were bald. The seats and the steering wheel were worn from use. The odometer showed 71,000 and some miles.

There was no gas gauge.

Suddenly I got a queasy feeling in the pit of my stomach. "Carl...do you, by any chance, have...a Geiger counter?"

"You know, I think I might. Hang on a sec."

I just stood and stared slack-jawed at the thing while Carl left and came back.

"Here it is."

"Check out the back first. The reactor was really heavy; it had its own wheels. It rode in that hole, kind of like a trailer, only surrounded by the car." Carl waved the Geiger counter's wand around inside the hole. There was a slight increase in the chattering noise it made, but only a little. "Any idea how much radiation is too much?"

"Not a clue."

"Still, it doesn't seem too bad."

"No."

"But it's not zero. That means this car once had a nuclear reactor. It was a fucking nuclear car!"

"Jesus."

We sat in the grass, leaning our backs against a nearby Camaro, and watched the air shimmer over the Nucleon's sun-warmed roof. Crickets chirped. Carl plucked a long stalk of grass and chewed on it thoughtfully.

"Where did you get this thing, anyway?" I asked.

He stared off at the setting sun for a while, then shook his head. "Sorry, I don't remember. I know it wasn't here when I bought the place back in '48."

"How can you forget buying an atomic car? You remember everything else about this place."

"It's a funny thing." He looked down into his cupped hands. "Usually it's pretty simple. Like, suppose you wanted a carburetor for a '52 Mercury. I'd know where to look, and I might find one or I might not. But sometimes, like with the Nucleon here"—he gestured at it with the stalk—"I remember exactly where it is, but I don't remember remembering it before, if you catch the distinction." He looked right at me then, his eyes hard. "I'm only telling you this because you're an artist. If I told my buddies at the VFW they'd have me locked up."

"My lips are sealed."

"I knew you'd understand."

The sun was setting behind the Nucleon, and the breeze was cooling. "What are we going to do with this thing?" I asked. "I sure don't have any place to park it."

"Cover it over with the tarp again, I guess. Maybe it'll be here tomorrow, maybe not. There's no telling."

We hauled the tarp back over that impossible car and walked back to the gate in silence. Then I turned to him and said, simply, "Thank you."

"You're welcome," he replied. He closed the gate behind me, and as I drove off I saw him sitting on the porch, staring off into the darkening sky.

After another year or so the blush was off the apple and I was no longer the hot new thing. Just as well, really; I was tired of junklets, tired of juggling assignments, tired of airports. I settled back into a career that was a lot like it had been before, only now I had a cushion of investments that meant I didn't have to hustle so hard between assignments. I was happy enough, I suppose, though sometimes I missed those crazy junklet days.

I was doing a lot of stuff based on natural forms and landscapes then, getting my reference photos on nature hikes, and I didn't see Carl very often. We always exchanged Christmas cards, though. Then one day I got a phone message from him: would I please come out to the yard, as soon as possible?

"Glad you could make it," he said as I walked up his porch steps the next day. He was sitting on a battered wire milk crate, looking like a broken gray umbrella. His health had been poor for months, though he rarely complained.

"No problem," I said. "How did you get my number?" He'd never called before.

"It was on your checks. Listen, I know this is going to seem strange, but I found this at the bottom of a coffee can full of bolts and somehow I just knew it belongs to you." He held out a small metallic object.

It was a key, a scarred brass thing, one of those ones that's the same on both sides. Smaller than a car key, bigger than a suitcase key. "I don't recognize it."

"You're sure? I don't get these feelings often, and when I do they're usually right."

"I'm pretty sure. Sorry."

"Well, keep it anyway. Memento of an old man's folly. Sorry I dragged you out here for nothing."

"That's OK, I was thinking of coming out for a visit anyway." We spent a pleasant hour on the porch, watching the leaves fall and talking about contact lenses, fast food, and the weather. Then I bought some flowerpots and went home.

Two weeks later I got a call from Laurel Hernandez, Carl's lawyer. Carl had died in his sleep, at the age of 78, and I was mentioned in his will. The funeral was Tuesday; the will would be read the next week.

I met dozens of people at the funeral, all of whom Carl had touched in some significant way. A woman for whom Carl had found a vibrating chair that was the only thing that made her bad back tolerable. A man who had kept a fleet of delivery trucks going with spare parts from Carl's yard. A family that had rebuilt a shoddy old house into a showplace, using materials and fixtures provided by Carl, and helped to revitalize their whole neighborhood. We spent the afternoon swapping Carl stories; it was a sad occasion, but not somber.

The will reading was a lot less crowded. There was me, and Ms. Hernandez, and a clerk, and a couple of cousins. The cousins got the investments, which were not trivial. I got the junkyard.

I told Ms. Hernandez I needed a couple of days to think about my options. But I was only halfway down the stairs from her office when I realized I already knew exactly what to do. I sat down right there on the steps and cried, overwhelmed by the generosity of Carl's final gift.

Ms. Hernandez drove me out to the yard after the transfer of title, a complicated ceremony involving the signing of more papers than I'd ever seen in my life. "Are you sure you don't want me to find a management company to run the business for you?" she asked as we got out of the car.

"I'm sure. I plan to keep on as a contract artist part-time, at least for a while, but this is what I want to do. Where I want to be. However, I'd appreciate the services of an experienced business lawyer."

"I would be happy to help."

The gate was padlocked. I'd never seen it padlocked before.

I stood there for a moment, not knowing what to do, and then I put my hands in my jacket pockets and felt something hard. It was the key Carl had given me the last time I saw him, which was also the last time I'd worn that jacket.

On impulse, I tried it in the padlock.

It worked.

We got inside and wandered around the yard. Ms. Hernandez didn't seem to think it was odd that I had a key to the gate, and I decided not to mention the circumstances under which I'd acquired it.

We paused before a rank of vacuum cleaners, a faded rainbow of aqua and pink and beige plastic. "Mr Tatyrczinski was one of my favorite clients," Ms. Hernandez said. "He gave me a bust of Kennedy for my birthday one year. Kennedy was my hero, but I don't think I ever mentioned that to him. Somehow he always knew just the right thing to do."

"Maybe he didn't know. Maybe the junkyard knew."

"What?"

"Never mind. Wait a minute, I just remembered something." I walked down to the end of the row of appliances, paused a moment, turned left. There, on a battered chrome dinette table, was a jar of buttons. I opened it, dug around for a moment. "Here. I think Carl would have liked you to have this."

It was a campaign pin in red, white, and blue. It was a little faded, but still plainly readable: **RE-ELECT JFK IN '64.**

"This must have been some kind of joke," Ms. Hernandez said.

"Maybe. Or maybe it's a little memento from a time that never was. A time that was better than this one."

"What a... a lovely thought. In any case, if I were your business lawyer I would caution you against giving away merchandise to friends and relatives. It's a common problem for new business owners."

"OK, I'll take three bucks for it. Naah, make it two-fifty."

"It's a deal."

We stood side by side and watched the sun set over the junkyard.

MNQ

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