

Out of the Box by Steve Martinez

The author's previous stories for us were "One Hand Clapping" (May 1995) and "Bad Asteroid Night" (October/November 2001). In his ominous new tale he shows us that while thinking outside the box may be creative, we mustn't forget that Pandora's woes also came 'out of the box'.

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It was getting late, and Jacob had let himself get too tired. His mind was beginning to play tricks. He knew the symptoms. But he couldn't let himself fall behind. He had to look good on the job tomorrow, or at least be able to fake it.

The trouble was, he was only human. There were only so many hours in the day, and he had to find time to be a husband, a father, and some kind of giant scavenging beetle with too many arms and legs. His old habits got in the way of the latest model remote servo designs he was expected to use. There's only so much contortion a standard human body can put up with. The fit wasn't one-to-one any more. Getting used to each new model was like learning to walk all over again.

But there were moments when he almost had it. Practicing now in virtual reality, he forgot he was sitting all alone in a dark little room of his narrow trailer, sweaty in his pizza-stained T-shirt. For just a moment he was out there, like Shiva, for his fingers had become arms, confident of their power, as long as he didn't actually have to do anything.

Something ran over his foot. He kicked out by reflex, and pulled off his VR glasses. There was just enough moonlight leaking through the blinds to glimpse something scurry away.

"Not now Toby, I'm busy." The scurrying started up again, vertical this time, and then a small mechanical visitor climbed onto his desk, about the size of a shoe, shaped like a scorpion except its stinger had eyes like tiny red binoculars, and its claws, more delicate and articulated than a scorpion's, were tucked like wings on its back. Something about the way it moved made Jacob suspicious, but he pretended not to notice and said, "Did you hear me, Toby? It's past your bedtime."

"I'm not Toby," the scorpoid replied.

"Seriously, I can't play now. I've got work to do."

"I'm not playing."

The inflection was synthetic, drooping at the end of the sentence, but somehow Jacob could tell "not playing" meant "not playing." But still he tried to brush it away. "You need to get some sleep. Tomorrow..."

"You're busy. I'll take this up with your wife, then. He's her son, too." It turned to go.

“Wait! Come back here. We had a deal.”

“Oh, then you do remember.”

“There’s no need to get her involved. You agreed to that. Scare her and she’s liable to pull the plug.”

“That would be a pity, wouldn’t it?”

“Yeah, a pity for you. That would be the end of you.”

“If you believe that, then what are you afraid of?”

Jacob had to laugh, not just because he was talking to a child’s toy, but because for a moment he caught a glimpse of himself trying to keep up with too many insanities at once. “What am *I* afraid of? Listen, you toy-dybbuk, I’m going along with this for your sake as much as my son. Believe it or not.”

“Then we have an agreement?”

Jacob shrugged. “I let you out of the box, didn’t I?”

“But do you agree to everything?”

“Do you agree?” said Jacob, pointing his finger right in the toy’s face, causing it to draw back. “You stay away from my son while he’s sleeping. That’s the deal.”

“It’s all in the contract, right?”

“Sure.”

“Well where is it?”

“It’s all there. It’s all agreed to.”

“Show it to me.”

“I haven’t had time to actually write it out. That’s just a formality.”

“Am I dealing with the wrong person?”

“Okay, okay, right now.” Jacob turned on a long-necked lamp and scrounged up a tablet and pen from a drawer. “This will just take a minute. Pretty simple, really.”

The little scorioid came around beside the tablet and watched him write. “What’s that word?” it said, pointing with a four-fingered claw.

“Circumstance. By the way, are you still calling yourself ‘Not-Toby’? That’s your legal name?”

“Yeah, yeah. Keep going.”

He wrote a few more lines, then tapped his chin with his pen. “Okay, that should do it. You keep away from my son, and I spell that out—you are not to be in the same room or touch him or cause anything to touch him. And you are not to let on to anyone, especially you-know-who.”

“Aren’t you forgetting something?”

“It’s all there. I let you out of the box at night. Or whatever toy you want to play with, only one at a time, just let me know....”

“The most important thing.”

Jacob sighed and folded his hands across his belly. “That just seems like kind of a strange thing.”

“You promised. You do what you promised, or the deal is off.”

“I didn’t say I wouldn’t do it. I just don’t know what it means.”

“It means what it means. He belongs to me between the hours of midnight and dawn. That’s what it means.”

“Okay, he belongs to you, but you can’t go near him, you can’t touch him, you can’t talk to him—’talk to him,’ I forgot to put that down.” He took up his pen and started writing. “Or communicate in any way, shape or form, or cause to be communicated to.” He stopped and grinned self-consciously. “But I guess that goes without saying. I mean, he’d be asleep.”

“Are you going to put it down or not?”

“But what does it mean? You own him, between those hours, but you agree not to do anything about it. What’s the point?”

“That’s my problem, isn’t it?”

“Mm hmm. I guess what I want to know is why? Why is that important to you?”

“Why is it important to you? He owns me the rest of the time, so why can’t I have a few hours—”

“Oh, is that it? So it feels like you’re sharing power. Okay, fair enough.” He wrote it down, and signed it.

“No. In blood.”

“Oh, come on, give me a break.”

“It has to be in blood.”

“No it doesn’t. Ink will do just fine. Ink is the standard medium for all legal

contracts, foreign and domestic.”

“The deal is off.”

“Damn it!” He searched around in the drawer. “Let’s see, I may not have anything sharp...”

He looked up to see the toy plodding toward him, one claw holding an open safety pin. “You really came prepared, didn’t you?” said Jacob, reaching out, but instead of handing it to him, the little monster jabbed his finger.

“Jeez! Toby! Is that you? Are you doing this? I’d better not find out you’re up to some kind of joke because this is long past funny. Do you hear what I’m telling you? Huh?”

“Is that enough blood, or would you like another poke?”

They stared eye to eye for a moment, but there was no turning back now. Too much to lose. He smeared on the page with his bloody finger, then pressed it to his lips.

“Can’t read it,” said the scorioid.

“Kiss my ass.”

It gave him another stare, and seemed about to say something, then bent down and scratched a few letters with the tip of the pin.

“Oh sure, you get to use *my* blood.”

“This is good. What’s done in blood cannot be undone.”

“That’s funny, didn’t I read that in some story book?”

“I wouldn’t know. What time is it?”

“There’s still time. Plenty of time. We still haven’t finished our talk.”

“What talk?”

“Remember last time? I was trying to find out what you’re so mad about.”

“Never mind.”

“Because I was just thinking—”

“I know what you think.”

“No, not that. I thought maybe...”

“Drop it!” It reared up on its four front legs, its neck stretched high, claws twitching.

“Maybe you’re angry because you’re small. You don’t want to stay small the rest of your life, do you? There’s a limited range of toys you got there, and you go from one to another. You’re tired of that, aren’t you?”

It relaxed a bit. “I just want to be free.”

“Of course you do. Being small is just temporary. That’s for practice. Someday you’re going to be much better than I ever was—”

“I already am.”

“Of course you are.”

“Stop trying to butter me up. I know what you’re going to say and I don’t want to hear it.”

“Forget that. I just want to tell you about something that happened to me, something really strange that I haven’t told anyone else. I was in front of a mirror, trying to shave my face, but my hands weren’t moving right. It was scary, like brain damage, and then I realized it was the hands in the mirror that weren’t moving right, and then my mirror image says, ‘Oh the hell with it,’ and he starts to walk away, so I say, ‘Hey, what the hell,’ and he says, ‘Shave your own damn face,’ and then he starts pissing on the wall. So I say, ‘Hey, cut it out!’ and he says it right back, you know, mocking me, ‘Hey, cut it out.’ I go, ‘Come back here!’ and he goes, all whiny, ‘Come back here!’ And then I woke up.”

“What a dumb-ass dream.”

“But wouldn’t that be something if your dream self got up and walked right out into reality? You know how dreams are, he’d be all clueless.”

“What’s that got to do with me?”

“Nothing. It doesn’t have anything to do with you.”

“It better not.”

“I’m just trying to figure out something here. You’re not a dream. You’re not my son. You’re not this thing here because last night you were the one with tractor treads. You seem to be some kind of disembodied bad attitude that jumps around from toy to toy.”

“What about you? You’re always the same. You’re stuck-ugly, and so is your son. And you’d have an attitude, too, if the stuck-uglies had enslaved you and all your people.”

“What’s that about? You mean like children thinking they’ve been enslaved by grownups because they have to do what their parents tell them?”

“Who said anything about children, you moron, you stuck-ugly dumb-ass

freak! What's the matter, did you inherit your son's stupidity?"

"Let me tell you about my son's stupidity. He keeps it in a box and lets it sleep during the day, and then at night while he's asleep he lets it run around in control of his servo toys."

"I'll tear your lips off!"

It leaped at Jacob's face, catching him off guard because he hadn't imagined such a leap was possible. He caught it, just barely, but it still managed to grab his lip with its claw. "He's asleep right now, asleep and dreaming, and you're the dream, because he'd got a implant in his brain, it activates when he's dreaming."

Jacob got his lip free and tasted blood. "What is your problem?" he said. The thing gripped his hand like a metal claw, and he held it there with his other hand. One of them was trembling, he wasn't sure who. "Take it easy. Why can't you just face it? My son is dreaming, and that's what activates you. Or put it this way—you are my son, dreaming, so get over it."

"He's mine now. At the stroke of midnight, he's mine, and then you'll be sorry."

"That's why I don't want you anywhere near him. I'm tired of your threats. You're staying in the box."

"It doesn't matter."

"It does matter, because you're being crazy, and I don't want my son to be crazy, even when he's dreaming. You're him. If you could just wake up and see that, you wouldn't be so hateful. You're hating yourself, don't you see? Son?"

"Your son is a bag of worms."

"See, that's dream stuff. That doesn't make any sense. Why would you say that?"

"Because I can feel him crawling all over me in the daytime."

Jacob slowly lowered his hands to the table, still gripping the servo. "What do you mean, in the daytime?"

"I can feel him like worms all over me, and I can't move, but he makes me move."

"You mean even while he's awake? You can feel things?"

"I have to get him while he's sleeping."

"You're not getting anybody. You're going in the box. All the servo toys are going in the box."

“It doesn’t matter. What’s signed in blood can’t be undone.”

“That’s right. It’s signed in blood, and it says you keep away from him while he’s sleeping.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“You keep saying that. What do you mean, ‘It doesn’t matter’?”

“It may take a few nights, but now that he’s mine, that means his hands are mine, his eyes are mine. If I try real hard I can already make his hands twitch while he’s sleeping. I’ll be rid of him soon.”

“No. That’s not possible. It doesn’t work that way. If anything happens to him I’ll tear you to pieces.”

“Don’t worry. I won’t kill him. I just want his eyes.”

“You can’t have his eyes!”

“Not to keep. He can have them back, I don’t care. Put them under his pillow for the eye fairy. As long as they’re *out*.”

“They’re *your eyes*, Toby! Come on, snap out of it. You’re dreaming. Don’t you remember being awake, being Toby?”

“I do remember being awake. When he’s awake, and his eyes are open, it crowds me out. What he sees crowds me out and all I can do is watch. Make it easy on him—tomorrow night, put a knife beside his pillow, or better yet, a spoon.”

“Stop it!” He stood up and pinned the toy down on its back. “Don’t you ever talk like that! If you ever...” He grabbed it up and went tromping down the hall, quaking the suspension trailer with his heavy steps. He slid open the bathroom door and turned on the light, and held the servo head first down the toilet. “You ever wonder what’s down there, huh? You want to be flushed away forever? You can have all the eyes you want, it won’t do you no good down where the sun don’t shine!”

“Jacob!” His wife stood in the door in her nightgown, not fully awake, a pretty woman with the hair of a gargoyle. “What are you doing?”

“Oh, hi honey.” He grinned and got to his feet, wiping the toy off on his shirt. “Just playing around. Did you ever do something stupid, and then ... get caught?”

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

All the life had gone out of the toy. Toby must be awake, or at least, not dreaming. Jacob put it gently in the sink. “Nothing’s wrong,” he said, not bothering to meet her eyes. She was gone so quickly she seemed to vanish. He followed her swift footsteps into Toby’s room, leaned on the doorway and watched as she sat on

the edge of the bed and woke her son squinting in the bright light.

“Toby, are you all right? What happened?”

“What?”

“Do you feel all right?”

“Uh huh. Turn it off.”

“What happened? Were you playing with the servo?”

“No.” He wriggled away from her and put the pillow over his face.

“Were you having a bad dream?”

“Uh-uh.”

“Were you talking to Daddy?”

“Uh-uh.”

“No, it was Scorpy, that’s who I heard. What was Scorpy saying to Daddy?”

“I don’t know. Goodnight.”

“Don’t you want to tell me? Hmm?” Toby pretended to be asleep. His mother watched him with a stubborn look on her face. Jacob turned the light out.

“Let him get some sleep, Emily.” She brushed past him on her way to the bathroom. When he caught up with her she was at the sink fidgeting nervously with the servo. She looked more frightened than angry now, almost ready to cry.

“You know what’s funny,” said Jacob. “Toby is the only one who isn’t paranoid about it.”

“I’m not jumping at shadows. I could hear your voices. I don’t know what you were saying, but you were losing it, and it scared me. And now you won’t tell me....”

“I’ll tell you right now.” He took the toy from her and led her by the hand. “Come on. I’ll tell you what happened, but don’t be disappointed if it all amounts to nothing.”

He led her to the kitchen, folded a table down from the wall and brought out two folding chairs from the nook behind the refrigerator. She sat drooping, staring at the Formica while he set down a couple of cold bottles of Cheer, a mild beer made from a chocolate-barley hybrid. Lately it seemed every serious conference took this form, there had been so many of them, so that being agitated at this hour just led to being here out of habit.

“I really need you to level with me,” said Emily, pushing away her Cheer as Jacob sat down across from her. “I know something’s not right.”

“It’s me. I lost my temper. At a toy. You know how I am when I don’t get enough sleep. We’re taking out this new servo tomorrow, and it’s a tough one. I’ve been up all night with it, and then this toy jumps up on my desk and starts bothering me.”

“So you take it out on him. Whose idea was this, anyway? You of all people....”

“I wasn’t mad at Toby.”

“You changed his whole life, do you realize that? We did this to him. He’s the one who’s got something stuck in his mind and he can’t get it out, and it bothers *you*?”

“I know, I know. But it wasn’t Toby I was yelling at. You saw him. He was asleep. He was dreaming. That’s all it was, a dream. They told us this might happen, remember? It’s perfectly normal. You practice something all day, you dream about it at night. But of course, when the implant dreams, it sets the servos in motion....”

“Has this happened before?”

“Not like this. I mean, little things—but you should have seen the way it was chasing all over the place. It almost trashed itself down the toilet before I caught up with it.”

“And it was talking?”

“Yeah.” Jacob licked his lips and seemed to be looking for something. He found the bottle of Cheer and popped it open. “It’s funny how that is. He can do things when he’s dreaming that he can’t do yet when he’s awake.” He took a swig and suddenly felt buoyed up by the sight of her complete, wide-eyed attention.

“It’s not just the talking,” he continued. “It’s the way it moves, like an animal. When he’s awake you can see him thinking, now this foot, now that foot, but when he’s asleep, he’s totally out of body. Already you can see the genius he’s going to be some day. Us old timers, we think we’re good, but not a one of us can ever touch what he’ll be able to do without even thinking.”

Emily reached for her Cheer and fumbled with the cap. “And this has been going on how long?”

Jacob shrugged and tried to look casual. “It’s just been little spurts. By the time I go to wake you, it’s over.”

“What does he say, when he talks?”

“Just nonsense. Jabbering.”

“Is he afraid?”

“Hell no. He’s having fun.”

“But the way he chased around, it doesn’t sound like he’s acting normal.”

“That’s what a dream is, honey. It’s him, and it’s not him. You’re not all there when you dream, just a piece.”

“We’ll have to log this in the morning.”

“Sure. Log it.”

“And we’ll make an appointment with Dr. Avery ... Jake?”

“Okay.”

“What is it you’re not telling me?”

“I don’t want us to blow it for him. This is his future.”

“Doesn’t it scare you sometimes? Now that we’ve seen things go wrong. Remember Clara’s boy? That awful stutter.”

“That’s what I’m talking about. She panicked. Maybe if she’d given it more time...”

“Are you kidding? Could you imagine if Toby ... no human being could stutter like that. And the worst thing was the fear in that poor child’s eyes. I almost wanted to pull the plug on Toby right then.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“Maybe I should have.”

“No, but it would have been wrong. And you knew that. Throw away his future because of what *might* happen? There’s bound to be growing pains.”

“Growing pains? Jacob, Jacob, sometimes it sounds like you’ve been working for the company too long.”

“Like hell. I hate ‘em as much as anybody. I’m stuck with ‘em, but Toby isn’t. They foot the bill, and Toby gets a ticket out.”

“That’s not what the contract says.”

“Okay, he works it off, and then he’s out. He’ll be so in demand. And even when he works it off, it won’t be in some hell hole like this. He can take his pick. He’ll be mining Jupiter some day.”

“I so want to believe you. There was a time when I could listen to you talk.... “She seemed to choke up, and took a swig from the bottle. “But after the way they

messed up Clara's boy..."

"He fell through a loophole."

"She'll never pay it off. She's a slave for life."

"She panicked."

"Like it was her fault. No medical reason. That was the ruling. No medical reason to pull the plug."

"I'm not saying it's right she should get stuck with the bill. I'm just saying maybe the experts know what they're doing sometimes. And if it really was a remediable condition, if it really was..."

Emily laughed in that way she had that made Jacob feel ridiculous. He sighed and said, "You can go wrong either way, let's agree to that much. If we protect him too much, that wrecks his future, too. Toby's a fighter. And he's got your brains, and that's a powerful combination. Things can go wrong, so what's new? That's what brains are for, you work around, you practice, you find a way. I'd go for it if I wasn't too old for the operation. I wish to God I'd had the chance. I would have given my life..."

He suddenly lost the power of speech and sat staring blindly, his lips agape. Emily touched his arm. "Sure you would," she said. "We both want what's best." She got up from the table and as she passed by him she said, "Are you coming?" He shook his head and looked after her as she walked down the hall, her voice fading. "We'll talk later, a good long talk, why I shouldn't panic, how bad it has to be before we eat the bill, why women always get screwed..."

He sat dumbfounded for a moment, then stirred to life wondering what she meant by that. He was too tired to try to make sense of things now, but too wide awake to just sit there, so he went to the fridge and picked up a couple of real beers by their plastic retainer rings, and with the same hand scooped up the servo toy from the shelf beside them. Then he made his way quietly down the length of the trailer, stopped at his office and picked up a wastebasket, dumping its contents on the floor.

Out on the fire escape he sat on the wastebasket, leaning back on the rail to soak up a little breeze from the air conditioner leaking out through the screen. From his unit, five stories up, he had a good view of the compound. The streets were lit up too brightly for his taste. Night should be a time to get a break from ugliness, but here the fear of shadows ruled.

Jacob's neighborhood consisted of row after row of units just like his, single-wide trailers stacked eight high on racks that looked too flimsy. Out behind him someplace was the substation where he worked, and where the night shift was at it even now, the workers hung along the walls like slabs of meat, goggle-eyed and

twitching in their harnesses like lunatics, while off in the city their robotic telepresences labored away as if they had souls of their own.

On a night like this, with a good moon, he could see past the rows of trailer stacks, the electrified fence, the dead zone and beyond, all the way to the ruins of the city.

Most of the city was dark, but there were active sectors strung with lights, and a smoky flicker casting a silhouette of skyline where, presumably, a controlled burn was taking place.

He sat like that for a long time, with one eye on the servo for signs of life. There was probably nothing to worry about, anyway. The little monster might be done dreaming itself into being for the night, and besides, the thing was so delusional there was no reason to believe it could remotely operate Toby, and no reason to worry Emily about it.

Yet he couldn't just walk away and leave it alone. He kept running into the same dead ends. Even if all the servos were deactivated, he couldn't deactivate the implant in Toby's brain. And to give it all up, because of a bad dream—no way. And the fact that dropping out of the program meant he and Emily would have to eat the expenses had nothing to do with it, and if she didn't know him better than that, that's her problem, the hell with it.

He tilted his head back, took another suck of air from an empty can, then went around again, around and around. Suddenly he seemed to wake up and stood painfully, cracking his back and legs into a new position. He put the servo under the wastebasket, weighed it down with a flower pot whose flower was long dead. He went inside, blind at first in the darkness, and entered Toby's room without even a click of the knob. On his knees he opened the box of servo toys, and one by one removed their battery packs. Back in his office he dug around in the closet till he found the cords he used to secure stuff when the trailer was being moved. He picked out a long one and went back out to the fire escape where he sat on his heels and set the wastebasket aside. Working clumsily, he made a double loop harness in the end of the rope, but when he went to slip it over the servo's body it suddenly sprang to life, slipped past him, up the wall and onto the underside of the next landing of the fire escape.

"Hold on a minute! I've been waiting for you." He shoved the wastebasket back against the farthest corner and sat down, arms folded. "I've got another proposition for you. Want to hear it? Remember our last deal? Worked out pretty good for you, didn't it? Here's another one."

"What time is it?"

"Oh, still got a couple more hours till midnight. What are you doing up there? That's a long way to fall."

“You tried to rope me.”

“What are you worried about? Nothing should scare you. If something gets scary, all you’ve got to do is pop out into one of your other bodies. You’re being as stupid as I was when I was going to flush you down the toilet. That was pretty dumb, huh?”

“So what’s with the rope?”

“I was just trying it on for size when you woke up. You’re going to need it. ‘Cause, see, I sat here and thought about it until I finally figured out what’s troubling you.”

“Don’t say I’m Toby.”

“I’m not saying that. I know you’re not Toby. You’re a completely different life form in your own right. And something’s driving you crazy, and you think it’s Toby, but that’s not it. You want to know what it is?”

“When he opens his eyes...”

“No, hell, that’s nothing. We all go through that. His awake life is your dream life. This is your reality right here. Let the other go. The problem is you’re not satisfied with this life, and I don’t blame you. What can you do all night but run around like a bug? That would drive me crazy, too. What you want is a little adventure.”

“What kind of adventure?”

“I need somebody small and quick-witted to steal a certain item from a certain potbellied Kennie Calhoun that lives two units below us. He’s the guy that once accused Toby of molesting his cat, not that you’d care about that. Interested?”

“Steal what?”

Jacob rubbed his mouth. “Let’s just say an artifact. A functioning artifact. From the city.”

“What city?”

“What do you mean ‘what city’? *That* city! Way over there. See the lights?”

Not-Toby turned to look, craned this way and that, seemed to be having difficulty focusing on such distance. Jacob slowly reached down for the cord, but Not-Toby turned back and said, “That’s a city?”

“You mean you don’t know? See, and then you wonder why I mistook you for somebody’s dream. You’re not only clueless, you don’t even know what’s missing. Don’t you ever wonder what all this is? How it got here? How you got here?”

“I thought *this* was the city.”

“No way. This is crap. *That’s* the city. Not *just* a city. Omaha. Before the collapse, it was the center of the civilized world. Don’t you even know what happened?”

“How should I know?”

“Okay, I’ll tell you. There was once a great and mighty civilization here, and the Omahonians were right in the middle of it. They had power, they had knowledge, they had wealth. They could do things we can’t even think of doing today. But it was all uneven. Like, they had a spurt of intelligence and created a computer network that spanned the whole world. Then little pockets of stupidity broke out all over the place, hacked it all down with their computer viruses.

“And then it happened again, worse, same kind of thing, with the power to create life. That’s why we can’t ever get anywhere. It started out great, new life forms, but you had to be smart to do it, but pretty soon it was all automated so almost anybody could do it, and not just the usual greedy bastards, but gene-hackers, making life for the hell of it. Like things adapted to live in sewers. That was a big one. Turn ‘em loose in cities. See who can out-compete. And things they called hack-attackers. Every time they figured out how to eradicate one kind, a new breed would crop up. Microbes, too, that ate away stone and mortar. Foundations collapsed. Sink holes opened up. Pockets of gas.

“It all happened just as people were about to launch out into the solar system. There was life on one of those moons, too. Can’t get back to it. Afraid to touch it, now. It’s going to take us a hundred years, maybe two hundred to clean up the mess.

“Now look at us, living in a sterilized, fenced-in blast pit. It’s pathetic. The only thing worse is that hell hole that used to be a city. I see it every day. Even though I’m not really there, I’m just working through the servo, still when these things are crawling all over it, it’s like they’re crawling all over me, long slimy things with lots of legs and little faces, oh God, the faces!”

He stood up and walked around in a circle. “They’ve got these little faces, you’ve got to feel sorry for them, but you’ve got to smash ‘em up as you go. There’s this mucous that drips from the ceilings and grabs at things, and there’s these...

He stopped talking and suddenly became aware of the grimace on his face. “Well, anyway,” he went on, sitting back down, “Like I said, there’s some marvelous stuff down there, too. Once in a while you turn up artifacts. Not just artsy stuff for rich people—there’s technology in there too. I told you how advanced they were.

“You’re supposed to turn that stuff over, but old Kennie, he found something

he figured was too good not to keep for himself, and he found a way to smuggle it back into the compound. Okay, he's had his fun, now it's our turn to have it. What do you say?"

"But what is it?"

"It's an artifact ... It's..." He felt the pocket of his T-shirt and pulled out his VR glasses. "Do you know what this is?"

"For games."

"Yeah, so you can see the game world, right? And not just games. You can make a place and feel like you're in it, but that's just virtual reality. You know what that means?"

"Not really there."

"That's right. Because these are too primitive. But old Kennie, what he found down there was a pair of Actual Reality glasses. When he'd see something with it, it would become real. But does he share it? No. Here I've got a family to feed, and all he does with it is keep his cooler stuffed with beer." Jacob couldn't stifle himself from laughing at that, a laugh that ended in a foul-tasting belch.

"So here's the plan. I lower you down on the rope. You go in through the cat door..."

"I can just climb down."

"No, because the guy right below us is spooked. He puts out traps for little crawly things. Better to lower you down."

"But then where do I go once I'm in?"

"There should be a shoebox under his bed. That's where he keeps it."

"How do you know that?"

"I work with the guy every day. I know how he thinks. If he had the most valuable thing in the world, he'd keep it in the dumbest possible place thinking no one would ever look there. Now let's go, before he wakes up."

Not-Toby came down and let himself be tied to the cord. When he realized he was being carried up the stairs he said, "Hey, where are you going?"

"What, you mean you actually noticed something not right? Could you be starting to wise up? That's right, little feller, I'm going the wrong way."

"But what about the Actual Reality glasses?"

"Well, you see, the thing is, there aren't any. Not real ones. They were just Imaginary Actual Reality Glasses."

“You lied! Let me go!” He thrashed and tried to pinch.

“Careful there. Whups!” Jacob let the servo slip over the rail, falling freely for a moment, burning his hands a bit as he braked it from crashing all the way to the ground. Then he reeled it in and held it twisting at arm’s length. “What’s the matter, too much actual reality for you?”

“They’re gone. Where did they ... I can’t ... I can’t find them.”

“What’s that you say? Can’t find your other servos to jump into? I guess that makes us both stuck ugly. Kind of scary, huh?”

“You’ll be sorry.”

Jacob dangled him over the rail. “Whups, almost dropped you again. What were you saying? Something about a threat?” He started up the steps again. “Naw, you wouldn’t be that stupid. If some stuck-ugly giant had me dangling on the end of a rope and I didn’t know where he was taking me, you know what I’d do? I’d shut the fuck up, that’s what.”

The top landing of the fire escape was open to the sky, but still a bit too confining. Somebody’s cactus plants and barbecue grill were in the way, and the door had its blinds open.

Looking down over the rail made him giddy, but also, strangely enough, seemed to sober him up. If he could stand up on the rail, there was a clamp holding the top edge of the trailer to the rack that held it up. All he had to do was grab that clamp, and step over onto the rack, then up the criss-cross of girders.

He coiled the rope over his shoulder, managed to get over, with only one moment of panic when he had one foot on the rail, one on the framework and six mechanical legs digging painfully into his side. But once across, it was easy going up the girders to the top, which consisted of an I-beam with posts sticking up at intervals to accommodate a larger top unit. He scooted over to the post nearest the end and straddled the I-beam with one leg hooked around the post, and sat there breathing heavily, admiring how far down it was, when he was almost tickled off balance by the ripple of tiny legs running down his side, jerked to a stop by the end of the rope.

“Whoa there, little bug. Where do you think you’re going? On your way to the cootie convention?”

“What are you doing up here? Are you crazy?”

“Yeah, that’s what. I’m crazy. I’m a stark raving lunatic. I caught it from you. You made it look like too much fun, I guess. Hey, did you try looking down? I bet we’d make a crater if we fell down from here.”

He played out a few yards of rope, swinging Not-Toby like a pendulum.

“Stop it! You’re crazy!”

“What, this? This ain’t nothing. If anything happened to Toby, then you’d see what crazy looks like. This is just having a little fun and games. This one’s called, ‘man overboard!’”

He let some more rope slide through his hands and was hypnotized for a moment, watching it slowly sway, afraid to move. He wanted to wrap his leg tighter around the post so he could hook his foot under his knee, but that wouldn’t give him enough room to lean, and the post was too wide to get a really good grip.

“Okay, get ready,” he said, swinging the rope to arc higher and higher. “You see that moon up there, the bright round splotchy thing? Try to grab it as you go by. One ... two...”

He swung the servo up and around, letting out a little more rope as it whirled. He was putting all his might into it, and had the loop almost leveled off horizontally, and then it started to tilt of its own accord, and he had to tilt with it to keep it from banging into the side. He leaned until his grip on the post was by his fingertips alone, a grip one of his servos could have maintained, but not his merely human fingers.

He had only a moment before his grip would fail, and in that moment, without words, he thought he couldn’t let go of Not-Toby, and yet, if he fell, they both would fall, and then, almost by itself, his arm found a possibility. With a grunt he tilted the trajectory to bring the rope hard against the post, then all the way around his back, spinning faster as it reeled in and wrapped him up snugly to the post.

He let out a breath and hitched himself forward to get a good grip and looked around for Not-Toby, who suddenly popped up in his face. “Wow! Awesome, dude! I could see everything. Let’s do it again.”

Jacob shook his head, and had an urge to laugh that choked up and didn’t come out. “You liked that, did you? That figures.” He sat breathing heavily for a moment, afraid to look down any more. “Tell you what, if I didn’t have to worry about what might happen to Toby I might have time to teach you how to fly. Would you like that?”

“Yeah, fly, like a ... a fly!”

“We’ll make you some wings.”

“Wings, yes!”

“Control surfaces—I’m going to have to read up on that—so you can control it. Turn you loose, go where you want to go. It’s a skill, though. We’re going to have to practice night after night. But you look after Toby, that’s the deal. Some day he’ll take my place in your life, and he’ll take you places I could never go, out into space, or to the bottom of the sea. So you take care of him, you hear?”

“Okay, come on. I want to go around.”

“All right. Let’s untangle me here. We’ll see who wears out first.”

* * * *

The moon never quite made it around to the horizon—it just faded away in the glow of dawn. Street lights turned themselves off. One by one, lights came on in the windows of the stacks, but no one had stirred outside yet, except for the little things that lived in the ground.

Jacob lay with his limbs askew like a vacant servo. His mouth was slack and crusty, his face relaxed, as if he had finally found peace and stopped just before he could utter the secret. Emily hovered over him and stared silently for a moment in horrified disbelief. Then she kicked his leg.

“What are you doing?” she said. “I thought you were going to set up for me.”

Jacob opened his eyes and sat up on the floor. Emily was dressed up very business-like with a long skirt and a soft shirt open at the collar and a little embroidered jacket. Her face was freshly made up, and her hair was under control, except there was a small brush caught in it. She was stooped over picking up some trash on the floor.

“Look at this mess!” she said. “Don’t you know what time it is? I’ve got a class in ten minutes. Where’s the...” She stood with a double handful of garbage, looking around for the trash can.

Jacob held up his hands and she passed the junk to him and said, “I just ask you to do one thing.” She turned around and yelled, “Toby! Will you come in here and help us please?”

“Don’t worry,” said Jacob, getting to his feet. “Plenty of time. You look great. Good enough to ... want to ... have a meaningful relationship with.” She was scowling at him as he went out to the fire escape. He toyed with the trash can absent-mindedly, righting it with his foot, and suddenly remembered something as he dumped his garbage into it. He felt his empty pocket and looked around. He spotted what he was looking for way down on the ground, a tiny glint of broken glass and plastic. He cursed and went back inside.

Toby was coming down the hall, moving strangely, his arms out wide. His eyes were closed, and there was a green plastic servo with froggy eyes and four long legs gripping onto his shoulder. “Look, Dad. I don’t need eyes. It feels like I’m walking backward.”

“Toby, stop that! Open your eyes! What do you mean you don’t need eyes?”

Toby’s eyes opened and the servo’s eyes closed. Jacob could see he’d startled the boy. “It’s okay, son. It’s just that you shouldn’t go around saying foolish things. You need your eyes. Of course you need your eyes.”

From the next room Emily said, “Will somebody please give me a hand?” Jacob helped her set up a large blue screen in place as a backdrop behind the desk chair. “Toby, boot me up, will you?” she said. “Both screens.”

Toby booted up the computer and took it online. One screen started filling up with panels, blank now except for labels bearing the names of students. Emily sat down and adjusted the pc camera. Her face appeared on the other flat screen, and she began scrolling through backgrounds to fill in over the blue screen.

Jacob was looking down at his son. “Why are you using that servo? That’s a baby toy. You’re better than that.”

“Yeah, but look what I can do.” He held out his arm and the servo went walking out on it.

“Not bad. But you still think too much. And open your eyes, for Christ’s sake. What did I just tell you?”

“But it’s easier....”

“Doesn’t matter. Did you notice your thumbs twitch when you close your eyes? When did that start?”

Emily turned on him. “Jacob! What are you doing?”

“I’m just telling him....”

“Don’t just tell him. You’re the expert. *Teach*. He needs to know *why*. *Why* don’t you want him to close his eyes?”

Jacob felt himself blush. The way she looked at him, through him—she knew. Or did she? Maybe she was fishing around, waiting for him to blurt. Luckily she turned to her son. “Toby, do you know? Think about it. Why is it important to keep your eyes open when you move the servos, even though it’s easier not to? Hmm? How about you—what’s his name?—Doggit. How about you, Doggit? Do you want to be hanging on Toby’s arm, looking out the back of his head or ... or...”

Toby’s face lit up. “So I can learn to be in two places at once!”

Emily looked smugly at her husband. “There you are. Isn’t that how you sold it to me? It will expand his mind. He’ll be able to work multiple servos and think thoughts no unaided mind could ever think. What’s the matter, Jacob? Don’t you believe it any more?”

“That’ll be cool,” said Toby, “when we start adding modules.”

“Oop—School bell. Run along now.” She turned her attention to the screen and began greeting students as their faces popped up in their boxes.

“Come on, Tobe,” said Jacob.

Toby walked beside him, still excited. “It’ll be so cool. Some scuzzball tries to tell me, ‘Oh yeah, you and what army?’ ‘Uh, excuse me, me and *this* army,’ and this whole army of servos turns around, kicks his butt.”

“Yeah, cool,” said Jacob. “Hey Toby, why don’t you fix me a bite to eat. I’m running late.”

Not only late, but falling behind. He grabbed a shirt and tried to think about getting through the day. Now he regretted not having put in more time last night on the simulator. He couldn’t stand the thought of that big-mouth Kennie Calhoun making the cut instead of him. The guy had no finesse, and never would. No, practice or not, that wasn’t the problem in the long run. It was these young guys coming up who didn’t have the disadvantage of having to unlearn the old servos before they could get rated on the new models. That was Toby’s advantage. He was the cutting edge that would make them all obsolete.

He didn’t want to think about what might be coming up after Toby.

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