

The Disemboweler

by Ekaterina Sedia

Someone was killing the cars in the neighborhood. Glenn read about it in the papers—how the owners found their disemboweled vehicles, nuts and gaskets strewn on the ground hard with frost, their sinews and muscle frozen and dead. Nobody knew what was the point of this crime except cruelty, or why the perpetrators were targeting this particular neighborhood. In his secret heart, Glenn suspected it was about him.

One morning, he found his trusty Peugeot eviscerated. Its large red heart lay among glittering metal, the only time Glenn had seen it still. The faint steam hung over the parking lot grass stiff with frost, and the spirit of the car had not yet departed—over the violated engine, a small smoky shaped coalesced.

"What happened?" Glenn whispered to the car spirit.

"Bad man," the spirit said, and faded, losing its form wisp by wisp, with nothing to hold it together. Glenn wondered briefly where spirits went when their vessels were destroyed, and knelt among the broken parts and white metal. He poked some ball bearings with his finger and called the police on his cell. At least, the cell phone's spirit was all right and perky.

As the body was removed, Glenn watched, hurt and perplexed. He loved his car, and his throat tightened at the thought that he would never hear its heartbeat again, never see the lopsided grin of the open trunk.

He walked to work that day, to a large animated building that hissed at him when he approached—it was not used to him appearing on foot, without the car or anything. After a suspicious sniffing and creaking, the building swung its doors and admitted Glenn to its womb interior, where he worked as a bookstore manager. The bookstore huddled on the second floor, its shelves heavy with out-of-print books and other not very valuable rarities. Two fat Abyssinian cats greeted Glenn by yawning and opening one eye each.

He started a coffeemaker (the one at home was broken, its spirit having left for some greener pastures; namely, Glenn's new vacuum cleaner), and it gurgled and exhaled fragrant steam, and its spirit rattled inside, disposing of the coffee grounds and adding milk and sugar.

"Thank you," Glenn said to the coffeemaker. He settled by a bookshelf, back against a row of clothbound book spines, one cat in his lap and the other at his side, and thought of his car.

It wasn't just the murder, but the savagery of it. Why would someone spread the innards around like that, in the cold light of the glittering sun, for the world to see what should stay hidden? The sight of displaced, busted gaskets flooded his mouth with bitter saliva, the harbinger of sickness and despair, just like the sight of his own blood did. It was as if the murderer looked to shock and terrify; unless there was another meaning in scattering of the car's entrails. Maybe he was looking for something inside, and had to shake out every minute cog and spring and flywheel.

He read the paper to calm himself. The incident with his deceased Peugeot was reported already, and so was another one – last night, it seemed, the murderer, already nicknamed the Disemboweler, got his hands on, and vivisected, a microwave oven callously left at the curb by its owners. Glenn shook his head at people who just tossed out their appliances rather than finding them a new home. Small appliances belonged indoors, since their grasp on their spirits was often more tenuous than that of the larger things.

Too windy a night, and one could kiss a microwave goodbye, its spirit blown away like so much smoke from overly vigorous cooking. The poor oven was cut up in much the same fashion, its tiny emitter elements scattered in the street like child's bones.

Glenn rubbed the bridge of his nose and drank his coffee. He heard someone scabble at the closed shop door but remained seated, confident that he was hidden from view. The customer soon gave up and left, abandoning Glenn to his solitude and quiet grief for the Peugeot. Cats purred.

Glenn hatched a plan. He would set a trap for the perpetrator, using his broken coffeemaker at home as bait. He doubted for a moment whether the dead appliance would attract the murderer but then decided that to ascertain the presence of life the criminal would have to get close to it. And then . . .

Then what? Glenn's shoulders jerked at the sudden cold draft that snuck under his clothes and ran down his back. He should call the police, call the neighborhood watch. Only then they would arrest the Disemboweler, haul him off, to be judged and probably eviscerated as a punishment. Glenn wanted to know why the disemboweler disemboweled, what possible secret lurked in the shiny machine guts. He decided to watch first and consider how to act later.

Later that night he prepared the sacrificial coffeemaker and left it by the curb, alone in the night. Glenn shivered; even though the thing was devoid of life, he felt bad abandoning it all alone in the night, with a crazy appliance killer lurking about. Cruelty was not easy for him.

Glenn placed the coffeemaker not far from a streetlamp, just on the edge of its halo of light, where he could see it from his first-story room. He settled before the window, his room dark, his head making a barely perceptible silhouette on the windowpane. And he waited.

It didn't take the murderer long—just as Glenn's knees started to ache and his shoulders went stiff, a long lank figure slid through the shadows, skirting around the circular pool of light, and squatted down by the coffeemaker. A long metal rod glinted in the streetlight as the disemboweler brought it down upon the defenseless coffeemaker; its former spirit, secure inside the vacuum cleaner, wailed at the destruction of its first home—a lone, sad note like a breath caught in a flute. In the street, glass and metal and bone shattered and sprayed in the light cast by the streetlamp.

The murderer remained crouched, and contemplated the broken pieces for a time. As Glenn watched him, a suspicion started to form in his mind. This was what the murderer did—he just wanted to see the pattern, like the diviner of old. Glenn grunted with frustration; this morning, he saw a book on fortune-telling, and hadn't thought to bring it home. Now he had to wait until tomorrow.

A shot rang out from the darkness, ricocheted off the lamppost and hit one of the larger pieces, displacing it. The Disemboweler jumped to his feet and rushed away, disappearing in the ink of the alley to the right of the house. Several policemen pooled into the light, and disappeared too, chasing the long silhouette of the Disemboweler.

Glenn rose, his knees popping, and stretched. It was time to go to bed anyway, and he only hoped that he would be able to sleep with all the danger and excitement. But before he reached his bedroom (the size of a handkerchief; apartments were expensive nowadays), he heard a sound coming from the outside. Scratching and dull thuds, directly on the wall of his apartment building. He listened, and the vacuum cleaner wrapped its hose around Glenn's ankle, worried. There were more scratching sounds, and then the shattering of glass from the kitchen.

Glenn disentangled himself from the fearful appliance and walked cautiously toward the kitchen. His slipped feet made no sound, and the apartment was dark. There was more creaking and scratching coming from the kitchen, and Glenn peered through the doorway.

"Halt!" A metallic, awful voice, nothing like the normal cadence of human speech or gentle gurgling of the spirits. "Do not move."

The sound petrified Glenn like the gaze of a basilisk. He felt something dash past his knee in the darkness. It was the vacuum cleaner; its spirit recognized the one who destroyed its former vessel and charged. There was a muffled curse and a massive thud as the vacuum wrapped its hose around the stranger's legs and pulled him down. What awful clanking, Glenn thought, still unable to move.

The stranger shook off the vacuum even as it hissed and spat, and stood. In the struggle, his long coat came unbuttoned, and soft glinting of old metal in the light from the steetlamp outside finally snapped Glenn out of his helpless terror. "You're an appliance," he said, as he took a cautious step into the kitchen.

"No!" The stranger clanked angrily across the kitchen, back and forth. "I'm not an appliance. I am a robot."

It was a good thing that Glenn was well read; he wouldn't have recognized the archaic word otherwise. These were soulless machines, built in the time before people learned to harness the power of nature spirits and infuse their appliances with souls of trees, rocks and small bodies of water. "Revenge then," Glenn said. "You're angry that they're better than you."

"No." The robot stopped. "It's not that, not that at all."

"I didn't know there were any of you still around."

"Just me," the robot said. "Can I hide here for a while? I have survived far too long to be captured because of a coffeemaker."

"Why would I let you?"

The robot stepped closer, its hot oily breath singeing Glenn's face. "Because I am stronger than you. I've never killed a person, but there's a first time for everything, isn't there?"

"I'll scream. They'll hear me and come for you."

"Compassion?" the robot tried.

"Not after you killed my car."

"I'm sorry. Would you like to know what it is that I do?"

"Yes," Glenn said. "Tell me, and then I'll decide." Glenn edged to the kitchen counter and lit a candle. Glenn much preferred candles to incandescent bulbs.

"It is an ancient art," the robot said, its faceted eyes glinting in the candlelight.

The word was haruspex, not disemboweler, the robot told Glenn. From Hittites to Babylonians to Etruscans to Romans to robots it went. The robot's insectoid jaws clicked and its long head glimmered in the buttery, yellow candlelight.

Robots do not have spirits, the robot contined. They are not like microwaves. Neither they have the knowledge of right and wrong, or any other reliable moral compass, like people do. They only have the desire to be ethical.

Haruspicy, the robot told him, unlike many other forms of divination, did not reveal future or any past

secrets; it did not concern itself with knowledge. It told you only whether you were right.

The Etruscans and other ancients used it to know the will of gods, whether they supported an undertaking either completed or intended. Robots used haruspicy to know whether they were making a moral choice, a correct choice. There was just no way around it.

Robots never sacrificed animals—flesh being innocent of the mechanical concerns—and only mechanical guts were acceptable to them. The innards of the combustible engines and electronic devices were used to guide the robots' search for excellence.

The robots had disappeared, and the engines and electronics acquired souls and flesh. Still, the robot carried on as before, unsure of what else it could do.

Glenn listened with a dawning sense of sympathy. It all sounded so understandable, and yet . . . the robot had killed Glenn's Peugeot and threatened violence against Glenn himself.

"Please," the robot said. "Don't give me to the police. They will kill me."

"Probably," Glenn agreed. "But technically, it won't be murder. They'll just take you apart."

The robot's eyes watched him, dull and empty of expression. "You know it is the same thing."

"What choice do I have?" Glenn now paced the room, crossing the yellow circle of candlelight, stepping into corner shadows and pulling his foot back quickly, as if he just stepped into too-cold water. "They've seen you, they know you. It's only a matter of time. You hid for so long . . . isn't it time?"

"No," the robot said. "The signs are clear—I mustn't aid my own demise. Believe me, I think of it every day. I ask the machines and their entrails, was I right to survive another day? And they always say yes."

"What do you want me to do? You can't hold me captive forever. People will notice."

"I can hide here. If you permit."

"They'll look for you. They'll see the tracks you left climbing up the wall."

The robot contemplated its hands, ending in three sharp metal claws that left deep gouges on the outside stonework of the apartment building and Glenn's kitchen windowsill. "I must run then."

"Good idea," Glenn said.

"They will catch me."

"Probably." Glenn paced again, shadows slipping over him like a second skin.

The vacuum cleaner kept close to Glenn, mistrustful of the robot. It whistled and gurgled and purred. Looking at it gave Glenn an idea.

"Perhaps, I could find you a spirit."

The robot's multijointed arms folded over the carapace of its chest covered in patches of old mold. "I do not see why I would need one."

"You won't have to kill anything then."

The robot inclined its long head. "I suppose. What will happen then? Will you help me?"

"I have to think about it," Glenn said. "But first, I need to sleep. You can stay here for now."

The next morning, Glenn went shopping. The car insurance paid up, and he decided to get a new vehicle first, now that it wouldn't be threatened by the Disemboweler.

He went to the parking lot, located next to a crystal-clear, frozen pond and surrounded by a willow grove. The willow branches stood naked like wicker. Several of the willows were blackened and dead, and Glenn suspected that the car lot owners were not always paying for their spirits. He hoped that they would not plunder the grove into oblivion.

He picked out a small red Audi—the price tag listed a reasonable sum, right under the warning sign that read "Spirit Is Not Included."

He paid for the car and for the delivery, and then walked through the grove, wondering about how to solve the problem of the robot holed up in his apartment. He could just call the police and have it over with; forgiveness was not easy for him. However, cruelty was even harder.

He wandered away the car lot and grove, passing by several stores that sold spirits. Perhaps he could find one that would suit the robot or the new car. He began browsing the shops. Tree and water spirits seemed too fluffy; rock spirits lacked vitality and spark—or so he thought until he found the spirit of an iron mine long since collapsed. The spirit bubbled in its bottle with subdued fire and brimstone, ancient anger and secret knowledge of gods so old even the Etruscans had no memory of them. It was perfect for both the car and the robot.

Glenn walked home, the bottle with the spirit stuffed into his coat pocket. He had the sidewalks all to himself, and the cars drove noiselessly past him, reflecting in the glassy storefronts. He was looking forward to not having to walk, and imagined what it would be like, to drive a car animated by an ancient spirit that smelled of forges and molten metal.

At home, the robot crouched over the vacuum cleaner.

Glenn stifled a scream and rushed over to protect his appliance. "What are you doing?"

"Nothing," the robot said, sullen, and rose to its feet. "Just petting."

The vacuum seemed unharmed.

"I'm sorry," Glenn said. "I just thought...."

The robot nodded. Its faceted eyes looked even more alien in the daylight. "Have you decided what you want to do?"

"Yes," Glenn said. "But you will have to help me."

The car arrived in the late afternoon, when the shadows started to grow long and blue. A large green truck, its wheels overgrown with emerald fur, carried Glenn's red Audi on its back.

Glenn went outside to say hello to the two mechanics who were unloading the lifeless car. "Got a spirit lined up yet?" the older of the two asked with mild disapproval in his voice.

"Sure," Glenn replied. "A good one, too."

"Where do you want it?" the other mechanic said.

"Here, around the corner. In the alley," Glenn said.

The second mechanic chuckled. "Afraid of the Disemboweler, eh? I read this morning the police had scared him off. Then again, better safe than sorry, right?"

The mechanics left the car in the alley, lifeless, motionless. Glenn and the robot waited for the mechanics to leave and for the darkness to descend. In the alley, away from the curious eyes, Glenn popped the hood and opened the engine compartment.

The robot went to work, busting open the engine and the drive train, tossing aside the gaskets and the caps, the gauges and the wheel bearings.

"How're the omens?" Glenn asked.

The robot stared at the heap of metal on the ground. "Good," it said. "The gods approve of the transformation."

Glenn nodded. He was not exactly sure of how the transformation would happen; he just knew that it had to. He trusted the robot, its knowledge of all things mechanical and their internal and secret workings, to figure out the way.

After most of the engine was gone, the robot set out to the reassembly. First, it folded its long body into the cavity, and Glenn handed it the necessary parts—hoses to connect itself to the engine's remains, and gaskets to fit over its electronic brain. Its faceted eyes spat forth narrow light beams that illuminated the shining chrome of the car's and robot's intestines mingled together.

The robot connected its brain to the drive shaft and the brakes; multicolored wires spun out of its arms and legs, cocooning everything inside the car into the robot's neural net. The robot became the car's engine and navigation system, its operator and its heart. Only the spirit that would animate the robot-car was still missing.

These things demanded care. The spirit had to like its new vessel to bond with it properly; otherwise, it would just blow away with the wind. And the old spirit was sure to be persnickety; Glenn only hoped that the abundance of metal and wires, the crackling, humming energy of the old robot would be enough.

Glenn flung the bottle that housed the spirit into the very center of the engine, and prayed that it would take. The spirit, a faint ochre-colored cloud, hovered over the engine in hesitation, the motes of dust dancing in the narrow beams of the robot's gaze. Slowly, the spirit gathered itself into a thin wisp, and the wisp twined around the beams of light, pulling itself deep into the robot's flat eyes.

The engine roared to life and thudded, the robot groaned in his metallic voice, and the innards of the car twisted, growing dark, knotted flesh and sulfurous deposits. A vein of marble bisected the vehicle's interior, splitting the back seat. Stalactites sprouted from the roof, the exhaust pipe breathed out a pungent cloud of foundry fumes, and the pavement cracked under the wheels. The car engine and the robot snorted with a single breath smelling of oil and hot metal and howled in a single furious metal voice, nothing like the gentle gurgling of the regular spirits.

The robot spoke no longer, but it seemed content; Glenn guessed that haruspicy had finally paid off for it. Disemboweling of the engines was just the first step; one had to put something back in the resulting void, and if one had removed a heart, what was a better substitute than the heart of one's own? He wondered if the oracles of old knew that, if to them too the spilling of the entrails was only half of the story, if their hearts were somehow filling the empty spaces they had created.

The police never found the Disemboweler, and soon the memory faded, turning into a legend. Glenn supposed that it was a fitting fate for the haruspex, and he never told anyone that his car was made of the

last robot on earth.

About the Author:

Ekaterina Sedia resides in the Pinelands of New Jersey. Her new novel, *The Secret History of Moscow*, was published by Prime Books in November 2007. Her next one, *The Alchemy of Stone*, will be published in June 2008. Her short stories have sold to *Analog*, *Baen's Universe*, *Fantasy Magazine*, and *Dark Wisdom*, as well as the *Japanese Dreams* (Prime Books) and *Magic in the Mirrorstone* (Mirrorstone Books) anthologies. Visit her at www.ekaterinasedia.com.

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