

## "Weapons of Discretion"

by Robert Reed

What he needs is an appropriate body and a reasonable face.

"Make your own selections," his companion urges. "This is your existence, after all."

"I want to be human," he says, picking a candidate floating among a million credible choices. He selects a young man's body and face, as it happens. He becomes small and brown, with hair like a thicket of black wire and a radiant smile and bright eyes dark as good earth. The legs are wearing trousers, the trunk is covered with a short-sleeved shirt, and the cotton fabric and bright dyes match a specific point of time and location deep inside the multiverse. Sandals are chemically identical to sweat-stained leather and old rubber. The new feet could use a good cleaning and perhaps a nail clipper. And the voice is as human as any, quietly asking his companion, "How large will it be?"

The answer is given in the standard units. In human terms, this means a little less than two kilotons.

"That's not very big," the youngster complains.

His companion uses silence and a hard glare.

In other words, he should accept what he is given. But every child is this way—a small dense body of raw potential, fighting the limits of adulthood, and sometimes even contesting the reasons for his existence.

"I'm ready now," the boy declares.

His companion says, "Hardly." Then urging him forwards, it adds, "You first need to study what your siblings have done."

The structure surrounding them is unbounded as well as endlessly complex, occupying half a dozen popular dimensions with countless partitions dividing it into smaller volumes. Passing through a certain doorway, they are suddenly in a realm with only three simple dimensions and the rough illusion of time. The boy stops before a stranger's face. Every visitor stops here. Peering into the soulful eyes, he asks, "Who is this?"

His companion offers a name.

The boy nods, repeating, "Albert," with pleasure. Brown fingers touch the chalky flesh of the face and the big eyes, then the shaggy graying hair and playful jutting tongue.

"He looks like fun," is the boy's assessment.

"Walk," his companion advises.

The first full exhibit is only a few miles in circumference—a patch of barren ground surrounding a small yet brilliant blister of newborn plasmas. No time passes inside the exhibit. Except for their presence, this is an authentic place. And like every piece of time, this moment exists independently of every other moment—a significant and unique arrangement of forces and particles, the entire concoction as inevitable as any other configuration found within a universe that is, in so many ways, infinite.

The boy walks across the desert floor and kneels beneath the fire. Clinging to a short metal tower is a very small, very red ant, one of its antennae making contact with the plasma. Peering at the ant, the boy

says, "I know him."

He knows all of them. But the boy has a more significant point to make.

"This is a good friend of mine," he claims.

And always will be, at least in a multitude of past moments—circumstances that stand forever inside the great good Creation.

His companion waits, patience faltering.

Then the boy says, "I know," and stands without prompting. "I have more to see." And together they walk back into the three-dimensional hallway.

"Ask," the companion insists.

"What did my ant-friend do with his chance?"

"Did he mention his plans?"

"Mathematics interested him," the boy admits. "There was a small, stubborn problem that he was thinking of exploring."

"Which problem?"

"He didn't tell me."

His companion laughs. "If I defined the problem, would you copy his inspiration?"

"I don't like mathematics that well," the boy admits. Then he dismisses the entire subject, asking instead, "Who was here?"

A name is offered.

The boy may or may not have heard the name. Unseen by the immovable people, he walks along a quiet river, pausing directly beneath the very tiny, still distant fireball. A single airplane catches the sunlight in the otherwise empty sky. Staring at the plane and then at the pinprick of light, his face reveals a mixture of curiosity and admiration.

He is not the first child to say, "Beautiful."

His companion allows it.

Then he looks at the people enjoying the day—pale faces and dark eyes, women and children outnumbering able-bodied men, everyone going about their business in the relaxed fashion that people use when they aren't yet aware that their world is in peril.

This is another genuine moment, eternal and important.

"She was a singer," his companion offers.

"A good singer?" he asks.

"It's not my place to say."

"Where is she?"

The companion lifts him into the sky. The still-living body of a small hawk hovers beside the newborn sun, sleek and beautiful in its own right. The hawk reaches into the fire with its beak. This is the picosecond when contact is made. A portion of that wild energy is being manipulated, woven into a lovely and enormous melody that will be carried off into the unseen dimensions.

“Would you like to hear a few notes?”

“No thank you.” Satisfied, the boy retreats to the hallway. The next exhibit shows a second city caught beneath a blossoming fireball, and that following that are deserts and stretches of cold tundra—sometimes the same terrain used on different occasions—and as the weapons grow in power, coral islands become the preferred targets.

Important humans have been snatched from key moments. Critical faces in the story, each one. The boy stops before a particular face, staring at the cigar that juts out of the grinning mouth, something about those fleshy cheeks and that wide smirk making the face seem boyish despite the load of years upon it.

“He looks happy,” the boy remarks.

“Because he believes he will use his weapons,” says his companion. “Use them in large numbers, against his sworn enemy.”

A swaggering, joyous man is what the portrait shows.

“Does it happen?” the boy asks. “Are his weapons used?”

“Not in this hallway,” says the voice.

“But in other hallways, with other humans...yes...?”

There can be no end to the chambers or hallways, and no end to the smiling men puffing on victory cigars. The boy knows this perfectly well. Yet it seems important to hear a wise soul telling him, “Not in this place, no. And even that is far more than you should know, my young friend.”

#

“What are you thinking?”

“Pardon me?”

“You’re thinking something. I’m curious what it is.”

The young woman smiles shyly. Standing on the street corner, alone, she knows better than to speak with a perfect stranger. But there is a beguiling quality about this boy. Maybe it’s the eyes. He has a bright, open gaze that makes her relax. Maybe it is his age, which is younger than the young men who usually make life difficult for solitary women. Whatever the reason, she says, “I was thinking, ‘What a nice day it turned out to be.’”

Not entirely true, but close enough.

The boy nods, apparently satisfied with her answer. He doesn’t stand too close, and for the moment, he says nothing.

Hands at her side, the woman watches for the bus.

After a moment, the boy says, “So are you going ask what I’m thinking?”

On its surface, the question is odd, but harmless. And his tone isn't injured or angry—nothing hinting at a disturbed personality. But she stares at him for a long moment, guessing what she can about him. About his age and background. He might be fourteen or a very youthful sixteen, or maybe he's only thirteen but overly mature. She has a little brother like this. Whoever he is, he's probably smart and a little too fearless—the kind of boy destined to cause trouble in the world, which is exactly the kind of boy she has always been attracted to.

“All right, I'll ask,” she says charitably. “What are you thinking about?”

“A problem,” he replies.

“What sort of problem?”

He glances at her, and she smiles to make him feel more at ease. “I'm supposed to do some little thing,” he says. “But I'm not sure how I want to accomplish it.”

“You have a chore then, do you?”

“I guess.”

“Who gave you the chore? One of your parents?”

“Sort of.”

She puts together a story and tells it to herself: The boy has been sent away from his friends or his computer, or most likely, both things. Somewhere in the city, a mother has grown tired of her son's presence, and she wants time to herself. That's what this means.

“You should do your chore,” she advises. The bus has finally appeared, rounding the corner at the bottom of the hill. Stepping closer to the curb, she says, “That's my advice to you.”

“Oh, I'll do my job,” he says. “I just don't know what I want to do.”

The bus is long and very quiet, powered by a superconductive rail buried in the pavement. It stops in front of her and opens one door, and she steps up, two detectors and the security guard recognizing her with a glance. She rides this bus every working day, making the commute to her job.

“Haven't seen you for a few days,” the guard mentions.

She smiles shyly, admitting, “I haven't felt very good. Some kind of bug.”

“But you feel better?”

“Mostly.”

“That's good,” he says, waving her inside.

For the last eleven months, the young woman has stood on this corner and waited for this particular bus to come. She woke up feeling tired and very empty, and it was raining hard at dawn. But now the clouds have cleared away and the morning couldn't be more pleasant.

The boy has a ticket and an ID. But the guard doesn't know him, taking the trouble to give him a second slower examination, using a wand as well as instincts born from a lifetime spent riding in the buses.

The woman claims her usual seat.

The boy walks past and settles several seats behind her. But at the next stop, the old woman who always has her little dog in her lap stands up—a fat, sour woman who in all of these months has never once spoken to the young woman.

Immediately, the boy slips ahead to claim the sour woman's seat.

"I'm still thinking about the day," the young woman reports, laughing softly. "It's very pleasant, isn't it?"

"I don't have an opinion," the boy allows.

It is an odd, unexpected response.

Then he leans forward, and with a voice both clear and soft, he tells her, "Did you know? With the proper structure and enough sensors in place, a nuclear firestorm can create a powerful, if extremely temporary intellect."

Her surprise is total. She glances over her shoulder, asking, "What are you talking about?"

"I thought I told you," says the boy. "I'm thinking about my chore, trying to decide the best way to do it."

"You're peculiar," she whispers.

She means it.

He nods as if pleased with his quirks. "When the universe was young and exceptionally hot, the first artificial explosions were set off. You didn't know that, did you? Most of the blasts were generated using pure hydrogen compressed around tiny black holes. The entities of that era used these short-lived computers to test every conceivable theory about their universe, and later, about the infinite multiverse. Most of the explosive energy was lost, wasted on electromagnetic displays and helium ash. But because of their labors, these people, the First Souls, were able to decipher the true shape of Creation. And later, they were able to bend the universal laws and borrow the hidden dimensions, creating homes for themselves that would keep them happy long after their birthplace cooled to a frigid, unlivable state."

The woman glances at the guard, then at the robot driver, her breathing quick and frightened.

"The First Souls abandoned our universe," the crazy boy continues. "New intelligences evolved here, in a slow uneven process, and for their own harsh reasons, they mastered fusion as well as its heavy-metal cousin, the clumsy and inefficient fission tool."

"You're telling me a story," she hopes. "Is that it? Is this some science fantasy that you just read?"

He says, "Yes."

Then he laughs and says, "No, actually. It is the truth."

She crosses her arms, looking out the windows, calculating the time left before her stop.

He says, "In most cases, these nuclear implements are used as weapons."

She swallows and sits perfectly still.

"The First Souls were always watching from the high dimensions, stepping forward and backward in time as necessary. They are good-natured creatures, by the way. With their tricks, they measured the carnage from each blast. They counted the dead, the maimed. The ripples made through the future. And they were bothered, in their fashion. Being wise, they couldn't feel surprised with what was happening. But

when they built the first fireballs, the universe was tiny and dense and far too hot to look at such things as serious hazards. By contrast, these new inventors lived in a chilled, rarified realm, impoverished in so many ways. Creating just one of these nuclear devices meant wasting a considerable portion of their very meager resources. Of course, sometimes the new creatures thought of adapting their weapons to act as high-grade computers. But there were too many practical stumbling blocks for slow, cold entities like them.”

“You’re crazy,” she mutters.

He doesn’t seem to notice. “With their honest, all-seeing eyes, the First Souls measured the death and waste, the misery and all the ugly aftermaths. And while the multiverse is infinite, it was their little portion of the Creation that was being hurt. Not much bothers them, but this did. This is their birthplace, after all. And do you know what they did?”

Did he expect her to answer that question?

“Miss,” he says, a small hand touching her on the shoulder.

Only one stop lies between here and her stop. If she can just sit here and do nothing—

“Do you know what the First Souls did?” the boy asks again.

“No,” she manages.

His hand lifts, finally. “They devised one good means to make a sorry situation more bearable. New souls were created—small, highly inventive entities—and each of us will be injected into one of those critical moments, put into your world just before a weapon’s detonation.”

The bus slows, but no one wants to get off and no one is waiting to board. So the engine borrows energy from the buried rail and hurries on.

“There’s only circumstance where the First Souls let themselves interfere with humans. They send in a new soul to embrace the weapon and bend its enormous power, wrenching a good, even noble thing out of what would otherwise be utter waste.”

The next stop is approaching; the woman’s arms remain crossed.

“And do you know what I think about that, miss?” The boy leans over the back of her seat now, his face beside her face. “I think the First Souls are cruel and sorry excuses for intelligent life.”

She uncrosses her arms.

A shaped charge buried in the floor beneath her seat acts as the trigger. The superconductive rail feels the blast and transmits an impulse forward to a control node, and corrupted software causes a cascading pulse of energy to return again, at the speed of light. Where the woman’s stomach used to reside, several kilograms of heavily shielded plutonium are set inside an explosive envelope. The pulse runs into her belly. The collapse to critical mass is swift and painless. But strangely, the woman remains aware of sitting on her seat, listening to a close voice telling her, “Relax.”

Saying, “Soon, this will be finished. Soon, this moment passes.”

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The dark-hair boy with dirty feet studies the newborn fireball. Then he looks back at his companion,

asking, "What is this?"

"A poem," the First Born answers. "Read a portion, if you wish."

He reaches through the wall of the bus, touching the plasma with the tips of two fingers. And after a brief instant, he looks again at his companion, asking, "Have you read this poem?"

"I have not, no."

The boy concentrates, pushing his entire into the firestorm.

"Do you think I should read it?" the First Born asks.

"No," says the boy. And then again, smiling with the purest pleasure, "No, I don't think you'd like it very much."

The End