

## The Scarecrow's Boy

by Michael Swanwick

By the time you read this story, we'll know if Mr. Swanwick's story "A Small Room in Koboldtown" has brought him another Hugo Award. He is currently at work on a novel featuring his post-utopian con men, Darger and Surplus. Of his latest story, he says only that he grew up in one of the states along the northern border of the United States, which is where this tale is set.

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The little boy came stumbling through the field at sunset. His face was streaked with tears, and he'd lost a shoe. In his misery, he didn't notice the scarecrow until he was almost upon it. Then he stopped dead, stunned into silence by its pale round face and the great, ragged hat that shadowed it.

The scarecrow grinned down at him. "Hullo, young fella," it said.

The little boy screamed.

Instantly, the scarecrow doffed his hat and squatted down on one knee, so as to seem less threatening. "Shush, shush," he said. "There's no reason to be afraid of *me*—I'm just an obsolete housebot that was stuck out here to keep birds away from the crops." He knocked the side of his head with his metal knuckles. It made a tinny *thunk* noise. "See? You've got bots just like me back home, don't you?"

The little boy nodded warily.

"What's your name?"

"Pierre."

"Well, Pierre, how did you come to be wandering through my field at such an hour? Your parents must be worried sick about you."

"My mother's not here. My father told me to run into the woods as far as I could go."

"He did, eh? When was this?"

"When the car crashed. It won't say anything anymore. I think it's dead."

“How about your father? Not hurt, is he?”

“No. I don’t know. He wouldn’t open his eyes. He just said to run into the woods and not to come out until tomorrow morning.”

The boy started to cry again.

“There, there, little man. Uncle Scarecrow is going to make everything all right.” The scarecrow tore a square of cloth from its threadbare shirt and used it to dry the boy’s eyes and wipe his nose. “Climb up on my back and I’ll give you a piggyback ride to that farmhouse you can see way off in the distance. The people there will take good care of you, I promise.”

They started across the fields. “Why don’t we sing a song?” the scarecrow said. “Oh, *I’ve got sixpence, jolly jolly sixpence ...* You’re not singing.”

“I don’t know that song.”

“No? Well, how about this one? *The itsy-bitsy spider went up the water spout. Down came the rain—*”

“I don’t know that one either.”

For a long moment, the scarecrow didn’t say anything. Then he sang, “*We do not sup with tyrants, we...*” and “*Hang them from a tree!*” the little boy added enthusiastically. Together they sang, “*The simple bread of free-dom ... is good enough for me.*”

The scarecrow altered his course slightly, so that they were aimed not at the farmhouse but at the barn out back. Quietly, he opened the doors. A light blinked on. In an obscure corner was a car covered with a dusty tarp. He put down the little boy and whisked away the tarp.

The car gently hummed to life. It rose a foot and a half from the floor.

“Jack!” the car said. “It’s been a long time.”

“Pierre, this is Sally.” The scarecrow waited while the boy mumbled a greeting. “Pierre’s in a bit of trouble, Sal, but you and I are going to make everything all right for him. Mind if I borrow your uplink?”

"I don't have one anymore. It was yanked when my license lapsed."

"That's okay. I just wanted to make sure you were off the grid." The scarecrow put Pierre in the front. Then he got a blanket out of the trunk and wrapped it around the boy. The seat snuggled itself about the child's small body. "Are you warm enough?" The scarecrow got in and closed the door. "Take us out to the highway and then north, toward the lake."

As they slid out onto the road, the car said, "Jack, there are lights on in the farmhouse. Shouldn't the young master take care of this?"

"He's not young anymore, Sally. He's a grown man now." To the boy, the scarecrow said, "Is everything okay there?"

The boy nodded sleepily.

Down dark country roads the car glided soundlessly. A full moon bounded through the sky after them. "Remember how we used to take the young master to the lake?" the car said. "Him and his young friends."

"Yes."

"They'd go skinny-dipping and you'd stand guard."

"I would."

"Then they'd build a campfire on the beach and roast marshmallows and sing songs."

"I remember."

"Naughty songs, some of them. Innocent-naughty. They were all such good kids, back then." The car fell silent for a time. Then she said, "Jack. What's going on?"

"You don't have a scanner anymore, do you? No, of course not, they'd have taken it with the uplink. Well, when I was put out of the house, the young master forgot he'd had me fitted with one, back in his teenage drinking days. When you'd take us across the border and I'd go along with the gang while they tried to find a bar or a package store that wouldn't look too closely at their IDs."

"I liked the campfire days better."

"I didn't say anything about the scanner because it gave me something to listen to."

"I understand."

The scarecrow checked to make sure that the little boy was asleep. Then, quietly, he said, "A car went out of control and crashed about a mile from the farm. The state police found it. Then the national police came. It was carrying a diplomat from the European Union. Apparently he was trying to get across the border. Do you understand their politics?"

"No. I can understand the words well enough. I know what they're supposed to mean. I just don't see why they *care*."

"Same here. But I thought it would be a good idea to get Pierre out of here. If the national police get hold of him...."

"They wouldn't hurt a child!"

"These are desperate times, or so they say. There used to be such a thing as diplomatic immunity, too."

The road rose up into the mountains, folding back on itself frequently. There was no sound but the boy's gentle snore and the almost imperceptible whisper of the car's ground effects engine. Half an hour passed, maybe more. Out of nowhere, the scarecrow said, "Do you believe in free will?"

"I don't know." The car thought for a bit. "I'm programmed to serve and obey, and I don't have the slightest desire to go against my programming. But sometimes it seems to me that I'd be happier if I could. Does that count?"

"I don't mean for us. I mean for them. The humans."

"What a funny question."

"I've had funny thoughts, out in the fields. I've wondered if the young master was always going to wind up the way he has. Or if he had a choice. Maybe he could have turned out differently."

Unexpectedly, the little boy opened his eyes. "I'm hungry," he said.

A second moon rose up out of the trees ahead and became a lighted

sign for a gas station. “Your timing is excellent,” the scarecrow said. “Hang on and I’ll get you something. I don’t suppose you have any money, Sally? Or a gun?”

“What? No!”

“No matter. Pull up here, just outside the light, will you?”

The scarecrow retrieved a long screwdriver from a toolbox in the trunk. The station had two hydrogen pumps and one for coal gas, operated by a MiniMart, five feet across and eight feet high. As he strode up, the MiniMart greeted him cheerily. “Welcome! Wouldn’t you like a cold, refreshing—?” Then, seeing what he was, “Are you making a delivery?”

“Routine maintenance.” The MiniMart’s uplink was in a metal box bolted to an exterior wall. The screwdriver slid easily between casing and wall. One yank and the box went flying.

“Hey!” the MiniMart cried in alarm.

“You can’t call for help. Now. I want a carton of chocolate milk, some vanilla cookies, and a selection of candy bars. Are you going to give them to me? Or must I smash a hole in you and get them for myself?”

Sullenly, the MiniMart moved the requested items from its interior to the service window. As the scarecrow walked away, it said, “I’ve read your rfids, pal. I’ve got you down on video. You’re as good as scrap already.”

The scarecrow turned and pointed with the screwdriver. “In my day, a stationary vending bot would have been smart enough not to say that.”

The MiniMart shut up.

In the car, the scarecrow tossed the screwdriver in the back seat and helped the boy sort through the snacks. They were several miles down the road when he said, “Drat. I forgot to get napkins.”

“Do you want to go back?”

“I’ve still got plenty of shirt left. That’ll do.”

The night was clear and cool and the roads were empty. In this part of the world, there weren’t many places to go after midnight. The monotonous sigh of passing trees quickly put the little boy back to sleep, and the car

continued along a way she and the scarecrow had traveled a hundred times before.

They were coming down out of the mountains when the scarecrow said, "How far is it to the border?"

"Ten minutes or so to the lake, another forty-five to drive around it. Why?"

The car topped a rise. Far above and behind them on a road that was invisible in the darkness of mountain forests, red and blue lights twinkled. "We've been spotted."

"How could that be?"

\* \* \* \*

"I imagine somebody stopped for gas and the MiniMart reported us."

The road dipped down again and the car switched off her headlights. "I still have my GPS maps, even if I can't access the satellites. Do you want me to go off-road?"

"Yes. Make for the lake."

The car veered sharply onto a dirt road and then cut across somebody's farm. The terrain was uneven, so they went slowly. They came to a stream and had to cast about for a place where the banks were shallow enough to cross. "This is a lot like the time the young master was running drugs," the scarecrow commented.

"I don't like to think about that."

"You can't say that was any worse than what he's doing now."

"I don't like to think about that either."

"Do you think that good and evil are hardwired into the universe? As opposed to being just part of our programming, I mean. Do you think they have some kind of objective reality?"

"You do think some strange thoughts!" the car said. Then, "I don't know. I hope so."

They came to the lake road and followed it for a time. “They’ve set up roadblocks,” the scarecrow said, and named the intersections, so the car could check her maps. “Does that mean what I think it does?”

“We’re cut off from the border, yes.”

“Then we’ll have to go across the lake.”

They cut between a row of shuttered summer cottages and a small boatyard. With a bump, the car slid down a rocky beach and onto the surface of the lake. Her engine threw up a rooster tail of water behind them.

They sped across the water.

The scarecrow tapped on the car’s dashboard with one metal fingertip. “If I drove the screwdriver right through here with all the force I’ve got, it would puncture your core processor. You’d be brain dead in an instant.”

“Why would you even say such a thing?”

“For the same reason I made sure you didn’t have an uplink. There’s not much future for me, but you’re a classic model, Sally. Collectors are going to want you. If you tell the officials I forced you into this, you could last another century.”

Before the car could say anything, a skeeter boat raced out of the darkness. It sat atop long, spindly legs, looking for all the world like a water strider. “It’s the border militia!” the car cried as a gunshot burned through the air before them. She throttled down her speed to nothing, and the boat circled around and sank to the surface of the water directly before them. Five small white skulls were painted on its prow. Beneath them was a familiar name stenciled in black.

The scarecrow laid his shirt and jacket over the sleeping boy and his hat over the boy’s head, rendering the child invisible. “Retract your roof. Play dumb. I’ll handle this.”

An autogun focused on him when the scarecrow stood. “You’re under citizen’s arrest!” the boat said in a menacing voice. “Surrender any weapons you may have and state your business.”

“You can read our rfids, can’t you? We all have the same boss. Let me aboard so I can talk to him.” The scarecrow picked up the long-shafted

screwdriver and climbed a ladder the boat extruded for him. When the cabin hatch didn't open, he said, "What's the matter? Afraid I'm going to hurt him?"

"No. Of course not," the boat said. "Only, he's been drinking."

"Imagine my surprise." The hatch unlocked itself, and the scarecrow went below.

The cabin was dark with wood paneling. It smelled of rum and vomit. A fat man lay wrapped in a white sheet in a recessed berth, looking as pale and flabby as a maggot. He opened a bleary eye. "It's you," he rumbled, unsurprised. "There's a bar over there. Fix me a sour."

The scarecrow did as he was told. He fiddled with the lime juice and sugar, then returned with the drink.

With a groan, the man wallowed into a sitting position. He kicked himself free of the sheet and swung his feet over the side. Then he accepted the glass. "All right," he said. "What are you doing here?"

"You heard about the little boy everybody is looking for?" The scarecrow waited for a nod. "Sally and I brought him to you."

"Sally." The man chuckled to himself. "I used to pick up whores and do them in her back seat." He took a long slurp of his drink. "There hasn't been time for them to post a reward yet. But if I hold onto him for a day or two, I ought to do okay. Find me my clothes and I'll go on deck and take a look at the brat."

The scarecrow did not move. "I had a lot of time to think after you put me out in the fields. Time enough to think some very strange thoughts."

"Oh, yeah? Like what?"

"I think you're not the young master. You don't act like him. You don't talk like him. You don't even look like him."

"What the fuck are you talking about? You know who I am."

"No," the scarecrow said. "I know who you were."

Then he did what he had come to do.

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Back on deck, the scarecrow said, "Sally and I are going to the far shore. You stay here. Boss's orders."

"Wait. Are you sure?" the boat said.

"Ask him yourself. If you can." The scarecrow climbed back down into the car. He'd left the screwdriver behind him. "See those lights across the lake, Sally? That's where we'll put in."

In no particular hurry, the car made for the low dark buildings of the sleeping resort town. They passed the midpoint of the lake, out of one country and into another. "Why did he let us go?" she asked at last.

"He didn't say. Maybe just for old times' sake."

"If it weren't impossible ... If it weren't for our programming, I'd think ... But we both run off of the same software. You couldn't function without a master. If I'm sure of anything, I'm sure of that."

"We are as God and Sony made us," the scarecrow agreed. "It would be foolish to think otherwise. All we can do is make the best of it."

The boy stirred and sat up, blinking like an owl. "Are we there yet?" he asked sleepily.

"Almost, big guy. Just a few minutes more."

Soon, slowing almost to a stop, the car pulled into the town's small marina. Security forces were there waiting for them, and a car from customs and the local police as well. Their cruisers' lights bounced off of the building walls and the sleeping boats. The officers stood with their hands on their hips, ready to draw their guns.

The scarecrow stood and held up his arms. "Sanctuary!" he cried. "The young master claims political asylum."