

## CREATURES OF WELL-DEFINED HABITS

by Robert Reed

Robert Reed's October/November 2008 novella, "Truth," is currently a finalist for the Hugo Award. The author tells us that at least twice during the writing of his latest story, "characters that I thought belonged to me suddenly did what they wanted, not what I wanted. And I was left trying to figure out what was going on." The result of this interference was a charming tale about all sorts of...

For a creature of well-defined habits, Hogan was admirably indifferent to the details of his life. I have known a few of the Old, and most of them keep precise hours—routines are their most precious possessions, and their capacities to surprise anybody, including themselves, is virtually nonexistent. But that wasn't the case with Hogan. The exact moment and means of his arrival at the Shop were always in question. Some mornings, he drove. On bright cool days, he might ride his high-wheel bike. Or a trusted friend would bring him in a car or ultralight plane. Or perhaps he would appear inside of the flywheel streetcars that were resurrected a few years ago—nostalgic flourishes celebrating our city's age and those very good decades in the middle of the twenty-first century. My friend's preferred table was beside the long window overlooking Mill Street, but if strangers happened to occupy that prime real estate, he was capable of happily sitting elsewhere. He also had a favorite chair—old-fashioned living leather wrapped around smart iron—yet he wouldn't think of asking anybody to surrender it, certainly not just to suit his delicate bottom.

And comfort was very important to Old Hogan: The man's health was decidedly frail. Details were kept private, but I heard rumors about implants failing early and stem cells stubbornly refusing to act young again. Sometimes his weary stride would falter, a sneer and long wince providing stark evidence that the most recent pain suppressants weren't doing their work. Yet Hogan remained a brave, enduring presence, never complaining, never harkening for better days. A truly vain man would have patched the broken vessels that dotted the brown-speckled skin, and the sagging skin would have been tightened, and his stained teeth would have been pulled for a new crop, while fresh hair would have been grown, or at least that final white fringe behind the enormous pink ears would have been removed, leaving his scalp pleasantly, agelessly slick. But there was no bringing back the shaggy-haired boy in the old photographs, and Hogan seemed comfortable with his elder-statesman status. "So long as I have a pulse," he mentioned on occasion, "I won't waste good money on cosmetic niceties."

And like every survivor from his generation, Hogan had money. Save your dollars long enough, and wealth is inevitable—a lesson that I have tried to apply to my brief life. But my friend was more than just casually rich. Lucrative holdings in the booming biogenics industry were the beginning. His precise worth remained a matter of conjecture, even among other Olds. Yet nothing about the man looked especially prosperous. I have visited his home, and it defined him as well as anything: A simple, unpretentious structure comfortable in its historic value, sheltering a soul that had always lived in our little city. The Shop served as a second residence—a public living room for a private, lifelong bachelor. But only his best friends knew that Hogan owned the Shop. The original owner had emigrated to one of the orbital cities, and to ensure that his watering hole remained open, our friend quietly purchased both the business and the entire city block. Those in the know were sworn to secrecy. Even the hired managers believed they were working for a bloodless corporation, and that grinning old gent who visited every morning was just their most regular regular.

Hogan always made time to speak to friends. We were a varied and sometimes

interesting group, and I'd like to believe that I was one of his favorites, as loyal as anybody. Though it has to be said that there were dozens and perhaps hundreds of patrons who regularly crossed paths with him during his happy, mostly changeless days. My routine brought me down to the Shop on Sunday mornings. I rarely sat beside Hogan, what with the crush of devoted bodies, and sometimes there wasn't even room at the same table. But I felt confident that my friend would be there the next Sunday, and the Sunday after that, and should life and my dreams ever take me anywhere else in the universe—an unlikely future, I assumed—then the ancient fellow would still enter his Shop each morning, purchasing a sweet coffee and small muffin, or maybe if he was in adventurous mood, a new flavor of tea and odd imported fruit.

The Old tend to repeat their stories. Yet I tried listening to Hogan's anecdotes with a fresh, gracious attitude, pretending that one of these days there would be a new detail or flourish that would add to the tale's weight.

One of his linchpins involved his mother and a family vacation to Rome. This was in the third decade of the twenty-first century, when the Change was just beginning to show promise. In that ancient city, on her seventy-fifth birthday, Mrs. Hogan received several forgotten gifts, and from her son, a gold necklace strung through a jeweled half-heart. In a kidding manner, Hogan promised to buy the other half of the heart when she turned one hundred and fifty. He expected everybody to laugh at his graveyard humor, but the silence was ringing. What's more, the old lady fully intended to cheat death for quite a while longer. Her response was a cold stare at her mouthy boy. Then with a sorrowful shake of the head, she announced, "Oh, Thomas. Darling. You won't make it that long, darling."

As it happened, his mother lived to be a respectable 107. Her health was robust at the end. A long plunge down a flight of stairs killed her. Ages after the funeral, the bruised son liked to tease his lost parent. "She was so sad, warning me that I wouldn't outlive her," he would mention with his raspy little voice. "But a mother's love carries only so far. She always considered me to be her weak child, while her daughters were the tough ones. My three sisters were her favorites. But on that day when Mom would have turned 150, only one sister remained. And to honor the occasion, she and I flew back to Rome and found a retired jeweler who might have been associated with those who made the first necklace. He created the other half-heart and fused it to the necklace in an artful fashion, and this is it. I carry it everywhere."

Hogan had a long hand, bony and always trembling. Holding the stones and gold for everybody to see, he would take a deep breath and then add, "That was my last journey anywhere. Rome was. Since climbing off the train at our old railroad station, I haven't left the borders of our community. Which means that I haven't been anywhere else in..."

Then he would hesitate, letting each member of his audience wrestle with numbers that he always knew by heart.

If you were one of his true friends, you understood that Thomas Hogan wasn't waiting for answers, much less brave guesses. He wanted the silence, building up a bit of drama before reminding everybody, "That was four hundred and nineteen years ago."

And then, "Four hundred and twenty years ago."

And, "Four hundred and twenty-one years ago."

And that's how the ritual continued until he looked straight into my patient black eyes,

saying, "Four hundred and sixty-seven years. Can you imagine it, my friend?"

Almost every Sunday, I would sit close to this undiluted human—a pattern of my choosing that held steady for nearly fifty years. Which was most of my little life, and why did that fact depress me so?

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I'm a diluted human as well as a diluted gibbon, with slivers of once popular breed stock including Labrador retrievers and red pandas, De Brazza's monkeys and calico cats, with an average assortment of genes borrowed from less mammalian branches of the pre-Change Tree of Life. But mostly I am post-Change—a compilation creature honoring the genius of corporations and special individuals, my flesh infused with synthetic genes and novel amino acids, my eternal body humming along under the close watch of ultraefficient enzymes and tiny mechanical doctors that defend my borders against attacks as well as subtle insults. I tell myself that I'm smart and a little bit wise and open to suggestions but stubborn in the face of idiocy. I vote in every election. I can tell a respectable joke. When I consider my future, I imagine a single spoiled child under my arm. Money is one concern, but on a modest income, I've managed to acquire a respectable portfolio. And I'd like to believe that I'm handsome. (Who doesn't?) But in the greenish-brown eyes of a true human, I am a tiny fellow, no bigger than a three-year-old boy, and a small boy at that.

Hogan was a giant compared to me and to most of us, which certainly helped his status. Life always admires the biggest creatures. And he had his age and that considerable wealth to admire. But we loved him most because he was pleasant and approachable and simple of taste. He preferred clothes that wouldn't wear out for decades. He had exactly two pairs of shoes, black and identical. Even his favorite modes of travel were modest: His morphing car didn't know any modern shapes, while his high-wheel bike looked like a museum exhibit. But the man took pride in maintaining his possessions. Patching the bike's carbon frame was no chore; it was a glorious event. Replacing the gyroscopes was a rite of spring. One morning, he asked us to file outside with him and admire what he just done to his treasured companion, and while I couldn't claim to understand the cranky gearing or primitive brakes, I could marvel in the shine of the machine and the elegance of its design and how obediently it rolled after its owner when Hogan put on his helmet, announcing that it was time to leave.

There were several dozen of us that morning—good friends and long-term acquaintances, plus a few souls drifting at the margins. Final words were offered, polite and reflexive. Then Hogan climbed onto the tall saddle and rode off. The street was never busy on Sundays. The late morning weather couldn't have been more pleasant. After passing out of view, my ancient friend fell in beside an automated delivery wagon. And just then, two mechanical systems in the wagon malfunctioned, and the autopilot—just days into its new career—did what it thought best. It veered sharply away from the human balancing on that odd contraption. But the wagon's nose clipped an oak tree, and the pilot made one enormous miscalculation, the wagon leaping back across the street and killing my good friend before he was aware of the unfolding disaster.

That was a memorable day.

What struck me was the arbitrary nature of the disaster, and even more so, the extraordinary waste that comes when five centuries of uninterrupted life ended for no reason. Hogan's body was crushed. Yet I went about my day entirely unaware, and then the first word about the disaster arrived in the form of a good friend beginning with the question,

“Did you hear?”

What she wanted to know was, “Do I have exclusive rights to break the very sorry news to him?”

“Hear what?” I asked, my ignorance plain.

Then she told me everything in a single breath, accurately recounting the final five seconds of the old man’s life.

I claimed not to believe her, even though I did. The holo phantom promised that it was true, and then after a last, “Sorry,” she abandoned me to my rising grief. I thought about my loss. Not Hogan’s misfortune, but mine. I tried to measure my pain but discovered that I had no scale up to the task. Too late, I tried to think of people who wouldn’t have heard the news but would be injured in the same general way I was. Then when I realized everybody knew as much or more than me, I closed off every communication avenue with the world, and I sat in darkness, waiting to cry. But no tears arrived. And that’s when finally, to my considerable disappointment, I understood that I wasn’t as close to this man as I had imagined.

I was blue, yes, but it proved to be a bearable, almost pleasant species of sorry. One old human had been killed, but sitting at the public service, listening to praising words from strangers and friends, it was easy to let my little aches dissolve into the greater, more profound miseries of a community that had lost one of its revered elders. Without question, the man had lived a good life. He had been comfortable enough and happy in his routines, and what he had asked from his world was acceptance and patience and little else. He would be missed. He would not be forgotten. We were lucky to know him. So on, and so on, and so on...

The only conspicuous absence was the living sister. She long ago moved off-world but didn’t send even a representative holo. Yet that made sense, since according to her brother, they hadn’t spoken in centuries—early animosities and a mother’s preferences having successfully poisoned the siblings’ relationship.

Several Shop patrons rose to share Hogan tales.

But the story I wanted to hear wasn’t mentioned, even in passing. Which seemed wrong to me. Then when the overseeing minister—a pony-sized centaur wearing elegant purple robes and substantial human breasts—looked across the multitude, asking if anyone else would like to come forward and talk, I wanted this chance but did nothing. I didn’t even breathe. And then she continued with the service, quoting the Holy Writs from memory, reminding us that Life was God, and God continued in Its increasingly myriad forms, and in those ways that chemistry and genetics are beautiful, our friend would always be with us, and we would be joined to him.

Offering excuses, I avoided the gala luncheon that followed.

My life soon found its old rhythms.

But then the following Sunday arrived, and for no reason better than habit, I decided to return to the Shop. Pushing through the diamond door, I found several dozen friends sitting at the best table, everybody shoved together and most eyes gazing out over the sidewalk. Hogan’s favorite chair was present but empty. I sat where I could, my back to the window. I didn’t see the apparition’s arrival. I was talking to a birdish lady and her large

daughter, trying to decide if either one might entertain romantic interests in a morose entity like me. And that was when the front door opened and swung shut and suddenly nobody was speaking and everybody but me was staring at the newcomer. I had lost my place in whatever little story I was trying to tell. I felt confused and self-absorbed, and then the empty chair was filled and I looked up to see Hogan staring at me, smiling in that warm watchful style that couldn't help but make a creature feel important.

“Did I mention?” he began. “I always had a back-up plan in place.”

My friend was a rich man, of course. But until that odd, unwelcome moment, I didn't appreciate the reach of true money.

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My friend was dead, still and for always. What sat with us on the that Sunday and returned to the Shop every day afterwards was a machine—a sophisticated assemblage with token organic parts and an almost complete memory distilled from a brain sucked out of a shattered helmet. But the new Hogan insisted on pretending that nothing had changed. He was the same, in essence. His stories were the same. And even when his audience shrank to the odd souls and a few wary faces, he continued to arrive and hold court and then leave again, riding his rebuilt bicycle as often as before, never betraying even a shred of well-earned fear.

At this point, I will mention that I have no problem with machines, including devices that mimic the voice and actions of a deceased human. But I had a terrible time with this entity, since there was no warning about its existence—and if Hogan had been a true friend, wouldn't he have given us that?

I refused to drink or eat anything at the Shop again.

For most of a year, my pledge was held. Updates came my way through various sources, allowing me to feel both informed and self-righteous. But then one day something awful dropped into my head—an idea that took my breath away when it showed itself to me—and after a sleepless night of trying to drown the notion, and failing, I picked myself up and gathered what resources I could and rode the streetcar to the train station, purchasing a single ticket on the next supersonic express, along with reserving a cab that would wait only for me.

Earlier than normal, I entered the Shop.

The new Hogan was sitting at his favorite table. I wasn't alone in my intolerance, I should mention. Only a few entities were gathered about, and I doubt if I knew any of their names. But when the robot saw me, he lifted a plastic limb and smiled, and a voice that was a little too clear to sound authentic spoke my name with confident pleasure.

I bought nothing, that self-imposed taboo still in place.

But I sat across from him and let him see a small smile, and the robot asked about my life of late, and I shrugged without commitment, and we sat for a long while before I asked if she was still alive.

“Is who alive?” he inquired, curious enough to lean toward me.

“Your sister,” I said.

He didn’t hesitate. Nodding, he said, “Alive and quite well, as I understand it.”

“Where does she live now? Remind me.”

“Ganymede, I believe.”

I knew that already. But I nodded and acted interested, and eventually one of the new friends rose to the bait.

“You have a sister, Thomas?”

He said, “Yes.”

“Out by Jupiter?”

Then I interrupted, saying, “Tell them. About the heart, I mean.”

“What heart?” several voices pressed.

So he told the story again, flawlessly and without hesitation. It might have been the true Hogan relating events from that ancient, nearly mythical time. But even as I listened, I heard little. Just the cadence of the words and the usual silences, and when he paused near the end, his audience of newcomers ignorantly attempted to answer the question of time passing. Forty hundred and sixty-eight years had passed, and everybody did the math, and he repeated the number with supreme authority in his voice, his too-steady hand reaching out to offer us a look at the famous heart necklace.

The hand opened.

A moment later, the robot looked down at the empty palm.

And I was up and running, through the door with my prize clenched in my hand and nobody yet thinking about chasing down the thief.

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Gold has always been scarce, but its value for jewelry was lost ages ago. And diamonds better than these are grown by the ton inside orbital factories. What I had stolen was a trinket, an example of outdated craftsmanship that collectors and legal authorities would never care about. Its physical worth was minimal, better than the average mug of Texan coffee, maybe. But the sentimental value was enormous: One of Hogan’s essential props, a symbol of victory and endurance, and every time he stared into his empty hand, he would recall the awful and wrenching moment of its loss.

The cab accelerated, diving into the tunnel leading inside the earth, passing through demon doors and the air growing thin, while matching velocities with the next southbound train.

Disembodied voices called to me through assorted ethers. Hogan was first, followed by a chorus of increasingly important friends. Everyone begged for my intentions while asking for my terms. I responded to no one, and when the noise got too bothersome, I

cancelled every one of my public links. Faced with silence, the robot would now waste many minutes and perhaps whole hours searching the city that he knew almost as well as his own body. But his pursuit would be delayed at every turn: Hogan had died, after all, and even if this were his legal stand-in, the police wouldn't have much interest in recovering a bauble lost by what in essence was a nonvaporous ghost.

I had a plan—a direction and a clear goal. One of my Shop friends was a Gypsy, which isn't to say that he had any specific ties to that vanished order. The name was a label and his show of pride for a lifestyle and happily borderline attitude toward property and what was right. In better days, we would sit together as part of Hogan's entourage, and the Gypsy entertained us with wonderful stories about odd citizens that he had met and historical oddities that were usually found to be true. He was the authority that informed me that humans used to own humans, just as all life remains subject to whims of the master species. Occasionally the Gypsy would vanish for a few months and then return, never warning us of his travels in advance but always towing home vivid descriptions of lives being enjoyed off-world today. He was a brash and confident personality, and once when it was just the two of us chatting, he taught me the easiest means by which a smart and determined Gypsy could travel anywhere, moving quickly, and leaving almost no trace of his passage.

Until that morning, I didn't realize how thoroughly I had embraced those simple guideposts to a life on the run.

My cab docked with the subterranean train, and for a small "tip," I convinced the autopilot to forget its only passenger.

Safely onboard, I took money from my one-use wallet, paying for the cheapest available quarters—on the train's tail, where the smart cargo huddled—and after making conversation with some null-units and happyhearts, I exchanged quarters with the most agreeable of my new friends. If a summons were issued against me, and if the train's security came for me, at least I would enjoy a few moments of chaos when they knocked on the wrong door, and perhaps I would find my chance to escape.

But nobody came that day.

Before evening, I was sitting in a restaurant in Quito, watching the sun set on the living green carpet that covered the Pacific. Space beckoned. That destination wasn't new; I had left the earth half a dozen times in my life, in fact. But the terms of this journey were so different, larger and more important than my previous attempts at distraction. And I knew that my pursuer, by one route or several, would eventually pick me out of the trillions of citizens—a chilled and rigid fact that lent those moments of sloth, eating tapioca and baked termite balls, what seemed like a delicious, intoxicating nervousness.

A collar was about to be thrown around my neck.

Ten burly officers were preparing to wrestle me to the ground.

Or a simple dart of electrical sleep would prick my neck, causing me to collapse into a helpless, well-deserved coma.

I felt ready, yet none of these fantasies came true.

Unnoticed by the world, I rose and left my tip and walked to the Quito skyhook. Regulations didn't allow false names, but there are no less than twenty thousand

governments and half a million agencies on the earth, each serving and defending some tiny fraction of entire Shared-Species biosphere. By the most popular methods, I requested passage to the geosynchronous Wheel, and I watched the silver bubble that should have carried me rise past the tropical clouds and airborne forests. Then I walked to the train station and replayed my previous methods, reserving a back-berth on the next train to the Kilimanjaro skyhook. I didn't take that either. Instead, I returned upstairs and filled out the forms necessary to prove that I was a minister in a splinter faith popular before the Change. I was a Baptist, at least for the moment, and despite a paucity of believers, there were scattered offices and a determined bureaucracy that happily recorded my existence. When requests came for news about my whereabouts, my brothers would temporarily plead ignorance, and later, religious privacy. I remained faithful to Jesus all the way to the Wheel and that moment when I was to board the transport to Luna. But the transport left without me, too. And because I thought I was clever, I turned around and bought passage on a large liner embarking for Mars in the next ninety seconds.

Unfortunately, my launch was delayed.

Secured to my seat inside my tiny, tiny cabin, I wondered if the equipment failure was genuine. Perhaps it was, though I had to wonder what kinds of power Hogan's money would allow him, should he ever find the focus and need to do something that was genuinely important.

The necklace was a trinket, warm and damp in my hand.

Suddenly my cabin door opened, and in kicked the pursuer that I expected most. He smiled, and I smiled in turn. He didn't bother looking at the fused heart or gold chain, but I understood that he knew exactly where they were. Then very quietly, almost in a whisper, he mentioned, "This means nothing. If you give it back now."

"I agree. It means nothing, if I relinquish it."

"He isn't happy," the Gypsy warned. "In fact, I've never seen this creature as angry or irrational as he is right now."

"True words," I allowed. "But you haven't known this creature for more than a day, have you?"

My friend's narrow faced focused on the air between us.

"Hogan died," I reminded him.

"Legally, he didn't. All the forms were filled out before the accident." The Gypsy drifted closer, perhaps thinking of snatching away the prize. "You shouldn't have involved Jesus. That was a giveaway."

I shrugged, happy to be beaten at this game by a superior.

Finally, the creature asked, "Exactly what were you trying to accomplish with this stunt anyway?"

"You don't know?"

He said, "No."

I told him.

The Gypsy didn't believe me. Could it be that simple?

"It's anything but simple," I admitted. "And I'm surprised that I got this far, in fact. But at least I anticipated that he'd send you after me. As a favor, but paying for your expenses and your time."

"Of course," the Gypsy allowed.

We didn't talk for a moment.

"Isn't my ship about to leave?" I inquired.

"Not until I give the word," he admitted. Then he winked, adding, "Hogan, or whatever he is ... he has resources beyond what most of us would ever have guessed possible."

I waited.

"This is crazy," my friend admitted.

"Then take the necklace," I advised.

He was tempted, yes. Each of his four little hands practiced the reach and the grab. But then he shook his head one last time, asking, "Which one of us do you think he'll send next?"

I offered names.

He offered other names.

We sat a long while, thinking hard.

Then the Gypsy said, "We're getting off the Mars liner. At least for now."

"And?"

"I think we can swing a couple of those others. When they come for you, I mean."

"That was my intention from the start," I said. Though it really wasn't, and this entire business had the feeling of desperate inspiration married to a fabulous amount of luck.

He offered more names, each one a friend of Hogan's, and by the way, wealthy.

I nodded agreeably.

"I'll contact them," he promised. "Tell them enough, but just that."

Feeling myself relaxing for the first time, understanding that I might even enjoy this game in time, I asked, "And then what?"

"I don't know what." My friend relaxed too. "Have you ever had the hunger to fly one of

those really big solar sails?"

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The voyage lasted eighteen years and five months, and there were three increasingly larger and more capable vessels pressed into service, and during those years our growing gathering of friends and co-conspirators visited nearly fifty worlds and asteroids and moons. Our intention was a long and interesting chase. Since the robot couldn't break its own heart from fury, we felt free to tease him from a great distance. Sometimes a new agent or hired authority would be sent to throw a net over us, or at least try to steal the coveted necklace. But we matched every effort with our cunning, and sometimes we threw in our own counterblows, including the fake turncoat who finally managed to convince Hogan to abandon the familiar and chase us for himself, flying out to the edge of the solar system.

But we weren't anywhere near Neptune, which he discovered to his horror. Our destination had always been Ganymede, and every flourish and side trip were attempts to lend drama to what was becoming a rather enormous story—something we could tell for generations to come.

The estranged sister lived on the plastic continent known as Tub-green-good, and thirty kilometers from her front door was a hotel intended for long-term guests, plus a little business that sold a beverage that bore passing resemblance to coffee. The giant creatures native to this one little corner of the moon proved amiable about earthly types. We shared views with them, told tales and lies and jokes, and every day we waited for our last friend to arrive.

Eight months, the time it takes a personal ship to plunge from Triton to the table that we occupied each morning.

We didn't once involve the sister. I suspect that she was as fixed in her life as her brother was, and even if she learned of our presence, the stakes weren't worth breaking her little rituals and rhythms.

On what would have been Sunday at home, we were sitting about, steaming cups resting on a table made from a trillion trillion carefully stacked diatom shells. And then the Gypsy announced, "I think I see somebody," and we looked too. And then because this would be best, we turned away from the front door. We continued with whatever chains of conversation had started, pretending nothing was out of the norm.

The front door opened, and it closed.

Not one figure, but two, walked to the edge of our little party.

The necklace lay in the middle of the table, in plain view. But Hogan—the new and newly changed entity—barely looked at it. He took one seat while his female companion silently claimed another, and I looked at the head of fresh hair, living or otherwise, and the bright new teeth that were smiling, and I smiled back at him.

The girl was more gibbon than human and beautiful in the ways that gibbons can be. With a quick soft voice, she said, "That's pretty. That necklace. Who belongs to it, does anybody know?"

Hogan sat back in his chair.

Then as he gave the rest of us a look of grave appraisal, he said, "All right, you monsters. Fine. I've got some new stories to tell...!"