

Factor Four Magazine

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NOTES FROM THE EDITOR

In just a few days I'll be attending SpikeCon, this year's NASFiC, out in Utah. As I push to get this issue ready before attending, I received my schedule of panels. One of which is the topic of Flash Fiction. I continue to try to push more panels on the topic of this great form of fiction, and I look forward to the discussion to be had.

I love attending conventions. There is much to be learned and I often see old friends and make new ones. SpoCon in Spokane last year was especially fruitful for me. I made some great friends there and I look forward to seeing them again this year. Also, SpoCon got me back into speaking at panels.

If there is one thing I enjoy more than attending panels, it is being on panels. I love sharing with the enthusiastic fans. I also have found that the large national and international conventions are a blast, but the local ones are more close knit. They both offer a great environment. Plus, local cons allow you to get the con experience but without some of the travel costs.

So I encourage you to attend your local cons. Support fandom. And if you'd like to see me attend one of your conventions, feel free to suggest my name. I always look forward to seeing the amazing fandoms out there!

Happy Reading,

Richard Flores IV
Editor-in-Chief

FIVE CANDLES FOR THE APOCALYPSE

by Michelle Muenzler

The first candle is the biggest—it's from when we met, don't you remember? Everything was still Christmas and pumpkin spice despite the news, and we found ourselves reaching for the last unscented candle on the shelf...and when our hands bumped, we both apologized at the same time, then blushed. Around us, people were screaming and snapping up essentials from each others' carts like Black Friday. So much screaming.

We were different, though. Quiet. Two lonely ships adrift in a sea of chaos.

I still don't know why you invited me, a complete stranger, back to your apartment.

But I'm glad you did.

~

The second candle is from our first blackout. We were going to light the candle, you and I, but we couldn't find the matches. And how silly is that really, in retrospect? To know where the candles are but not the matches?

Yes, I remember fumbling blindly through junk drawers, tossing stray pens and paper clips everywhere in the dark. Outside, sirens wailed. Somewhere, a car crunched into another.

But we were laughing. Probably because crying already hurt too much.

That first blackout was the worst in many ways.

And yet, what I wouldn't trade to go back to that day.
To go back with you.

~

The third candle is from your birthday.

The cake was terrible. There were no eggs, of course, those being a luxury by that point. Same as butter. But there was a bit of sugar. Enough to pretend, at least.

Still, I remember the scrunch of your face when you took that first bite. As you choked it down. And afterward, you smiled and we danced in the living room to old cassettes you'd never gotten around to discarding. Cheated at Scrabble. Watched the moon rise and whispered about what we'd do *after*.

It was a perfect day. The most perfect I can remember.

As for the lone birthday candle I'd scrounged from the pantry to set atop your cake, we never did light it.

I wish I could remember why.

~

The fourth candle was your neighbor's.

The blackouts were a constant by that point, as was the screaming. But there were no government advisories on staying safe, so we did the only thing we knew—hunker in the closet with a blanket drawn overhead and wait for the power to return.

I nearly peed my pants when someone banged on the door.

We didn't know it was your neighbor at the time. Only that someone or something was yelling in an incoherent language, beating at our door like a drum.

It was hours before it ended. Hours more before we dared open the door. And what we saw, what was left of her—

No.

I don't want to remember this one anymore.

Let's move on.

~

Are you tired still? You were so tired, at the end. The pools of your eyes were gray, your shoulders sunk like wrecks. I didn't know anyone could be so tired.

I felt it too. I know you won't believe me, if you can still hear—and can you? Can you hear me?

No. I'm sure you can't.

I suppose that's one thing to be happy for. At least you're no longer tired. No longer afraid.

At some point, it's hard to be anything else. You're just another bit of flotsam, subject to the storm.

And not all flotsam makes it ashore.

~

The fifth candle.

You never saw this one. I found it behind the shelf at the corner bodega that last scavenging run. It smells like cinnamon. I'd almost forgotten what cinnamon smells like, but yeah, definitely cinnamon. Obnoxiously so.

I know it became a joke after our first few failures to light any candles. *Why start now*, you'd said as I revealed the matches finally uncovered in the laundry closet of all places. *We shouldn't have to be afraid of the dark*.

And so our candle stash remained unlit. Despite the blackouts. Despite what happened to your neighbor. Despite what's happened to everyone in this increasingly silent world.

I thought you'd be okay if I went out. I was only a few hours. Barely any time at all.

But your calm was a lie.

I wasn't there when you needed me. The darkness came at last to our apartment, and you decided to open the door. To let it in.

I was never enough—I know that now, and I'm sorry for it. I was just a stranger in the end, a random person occupying a shared space for a while...then not.

But I'm not sorry for lighting these candles today. For setting them aflame, one by one.

This last one—the cinnamon—is pretty awful. You'd have hated it.

Or maybe I'm wrong. Maybe you'd have loved the smell.

Because at least it would have reminded you of living.

And some days, that reminder is all we have.

DOORS

By Jenny Rae Rappaport

There are four doors in front of you. There are always four doors because four is the number of times you have told yourself that there is nothing wrong with you. Not that you believe that—yet.

The first door leads to the unicorn kingdom, full of fluff and sass and prancing ponies. You have been there before, years ago as a child. There is something about it that no longer appeals; you have grown old enough not to welcome its deceptions, and the unicorns have evil grins when they gore you to death.

The second door leads to the tech world. You have been there before, as well. But the gleaming computers and cyborg body modifications leave you feeling cold inside.

The third door leads to your childhood, and it is tempting to consider stepping inside it and hiding. But you have always been strange; there have always been voices clamoring for your attention, and your parents were never quite able to deal with them. You wish that they had been better parents, but you also wish that they still spoke to you. Life is complicated like that.

The fourth door leads to the void. You do not open it. That way lies madness.

You do not open any of the doors because the voices confirm that they are all wrong. They will not help you. They will just suck you in, and that is something you can ill afford. If you could afford to be lost in your own head forever, none of this would matter. But there are others waiting for you out there—children, a spouse—and you owe it to them to

find your way through this maze.

So instead, you choose to step sideways between the first and second door, seeking a happy medium where you can sit and think. The wall between the doors opens up like a spoon run through pudding, and sucks you in; this is brain logic, after all, where you can walk on walls and fly through stars, if you so choose. You don't choose to do that.

The world you find between the first and second door is oddly comforting. There are elves who utilize steam engines, and humans who happily pop around using elf teleportation. It's very magical steampunk. You discover that you like sitting in meadows, and watching the elves fly their proto-airplanes above. No one hurts you; no one needs you too much. The voices quiet down, and you sit in the meadows and simply breathe. You could stay here for a very long time.

But this is not reality.

None of this is reality.

And part of you knows this, but refuses to acknowledge it, and another part acknowledges it, but refuses to deal with it. And many other parts of yourself are broken and confused, and oddly soothed by the things that the voices tell you. And then you fight within yourself, because things are true and not true, and there is never any telling what's real or not real.

But back to the doors.

Eventually, you leave the magical steampunk world. It's grown too confining, and you want to see what else is out there. There may be a way out that you have not tried; there may be a path that can lead you back to your family and the world they live in. You suspect that they are lonely without you, and then, you instantly suspect that they don't care that you spend most of your days merely existing. This is the fallacy of believing what your brain tells you—nothing is entirely true and nothing is entirely false.

You go back to the doors, and you stare at them, hoping that they have changed. They have not changed.

This time you step between the second and third door, into a childhood that is suddenly full of genetically-modified people with metallic limbs. Strangely enough, this does not make your childhood any more horrible than it was, and in fact, might actually improve it.

You like the father with the metal legs, who is no longer confined to a wheelchair. You like the mother who has had something done to her, and no longer beats you when you make a mistake. When things seem wrong, and the world contracts, and the voices beg—and you make a mistake. Always, the mistakes. Never with the perfection. It is impossible to ever please your parents.

You do not stay forever in this world of somewhat-less-horrible-childhood.

Back to the doors, back to the doors, back to the doors.

And then, there is only the void left. You will never get anywhere, if you do not go through the doors, and you sense that you really are running late to get somewhere. You can choose the void, or the void interacting with your childhood somehow, and really, that version of childhood might be even worse than the one before it. It's not really a choice, is it? If you don't go through, you will never get back to who you were before; you will never find your way out of the knots you have tied yourself in.

There is no hiding in the void.

There is the terror of knowing that you will never be better. That there is no better. That there will always be voices; that there will always be therapists; that there will always be medications to try. There will always be something that someone wants you to do to your brain, and you are not entirely sure that you want to do that. It is very hard sometimes to tell where you begin and the voices end.

But you are tired of the voices. You do not want to live your life listening to the chatter of your own demons; you want to hear what the ones you love are saying to you. There is a certain sadness to believing that a tiny pill alone can hold the darkness at bay, but if you do not believe that, you may never get free. The fear of everything that could continue to go wrong rushes at you—

And then, you blink.

There are four doors. There are always four doors. There will always be something wrong with you. But there will always be something right with you, as well.

And there, in the corner, hiding all this time in plain-view—one small window, just big enough for you to climb through. A window that leads nowhere except to the real world. You see a tree and the sun, and the smallest sliver of pale blue sky. There is nothing more terrifying than that tiny piece of sky.

You climb through the window.

MONOCHROMATIC MANDATE

by Milo James Fowler

Black or white. No other option. You either agree or disagree. Black for YES, white for NO.

No wiggle room for cognitive dissonance or seeing potential with both sides of an issue. No gray areas allowed. Binary is best, all things considered. Less confusing, at any rate. So they say.

The noon chime signals that it's time to vote. You have thirty seconds.

This one is easy. You either want the new overpass, or you don't. It will join the westbound four-lane highway with the northbound eight-lane interstate. Looming over a gas station and two restaurants, it will sweep merging traffic between two high-rise hotels. Unfortunate to be in the business of luring potential customers during the sprawling, clamorous construction phase, but perhaps these establishments will see more clientele in the long run.

You read the details on the heads-up display, glowing across the windshield of your autonomous sedan. Your forebears would have had to let go of the steering wheel with one hand and tap either YES or NO on their phones, docked on the dashboard. But you have both hands free, stuffed into the generous pockets of your gray fleece hoodie.

So you pull out your left hand and reach toward YES...

And pause.

The potential convenience entices you. The idea of merging onto the northbound interstate without getting off the highway, driving two blocks (each one equipped with a temperamental stop light), past a gas station, two restaurants, and two hotels before taking the northbound onramp.

The overpass is a no-brainer; it really should have been built decades ago.

WARNING: 15 SECONDS lights up on the display. No time to overthink this. The Spectrum Enforcers say that your first knee-jerk reaction is always closest to your truth.

So...YES?

Then again, there are the construction efforts to consider and the effect these long-term activities (with no completion date set in stone) will have on traffic in an already congested area during the morning and evening rush hours. Not to mention the literal shadow cast across neighboring buildings by such an unsightly addition. The southbound overpass already in place channels traffic across a no one's land of indigenous desert vegetation. No gas station, restaurants, or hotels to be concerned with there.

Is a northbound counterpart really necessary?

Your hand falters, begins to sway toward NO on the glass.

If commuters have to get off the highway in order to merge onto the interstate, so what? They should be used to the inconvenience by now. It's an expected part of their daily commute. If two traffic lights slow them down in the process, so what? Why the rush, anyway? The northbound interstate is often little more than a parking lot; anything that delays the merging traffic should continue to do so. Better for everyone, congestion-wise.

Inconvenience or convenience? That's what this boils down to in the end, and that which is in the public interest is usually the most beneficial. Or so you've been told.

Your hand drifts back toward YES.

But then you see in your mind's eye that newly minted overpass choked with traffic merging onto the northbound interstate, backing up all along the westbound highway. Without those two stop lights to filter the traffic, everybody is sitting on that overpass going nowhere fast, sluggishly merging northbound a few centimeters at a time.

WARNING flashes on the display.

Your fingers twitch. It's taking you too long to decide. Vote either YES or NO. Agree or disagree. That's all there is to it. You can't afford to overthink this.

Of course you remember the popular vote for 1% or 2% milk last week. No way you could forget it. You took too long to weigh the benefits and disadvantages, and you received a warning from the Spectrum Enforcers then as well.

You can't make a habit of this. You can't afford to be disenfranchised. Your parents were, once their advanced age precluded them from making

snap decisions, and they never contributed to society as a whole ever again.

So you close your eyes and tap...

NO.

The results of the vote will be available shortly. Every citizen has a voice, and everyone knows how their fellow citizens voted. There's no need to keep such things private. No one has anything to hide. Voting is good for one and all. Spectrum boasts a 98% participation rate by the voting populace, up from that pitiful 47% a generation ago. What was wrong with people back then? Didn't they see value in voicing their opinions?

You voted NO, so the exterior of your sedan is now white. You glance outside at the other commuters in their vehicles, and you notice their exteriors are black.

All of them.

They're looking back at you, some scowling, others insulting you with rude gestures. Horns blare as you pass each other. A delivery truck nearly sideswipes you, the driver foregoing autonomic features in order to seize full control, both hands on the wheel. Another rude gesture from him for good measure as he speeds past you.

You keep your hands in your pockets, your eyes fixed on the road ahead.

The abuse from your fellow motorists continues as long as it takes for your sedan to navigate a course home. Past the gas station. Past the two restaurants and hotels and stop lights. Down the two-lane road toward the coast where the setting sun shimmers golden on the liquid mercury of the Pacific. Yours is the only vehicle winding up the steep cliffside hill to your earth-toned house surrounded by blooming jacaranda mimosifolia. Bursts of lavender blue greet you like silent fireworks paused mid-celebration against an indigo sky.

The ocean view is spectacular up here. So many colors, so much variety.

Your sedan rolls to a stop in front of your garage door.

YOU ARE IN THE MINORITY > WOULD YOU LIKE TO CHANGE YOUR VOTE?

You stare at the words hovering on your windshield.

Then you give them a rude gesture and exit your vehicle.

THE DEFINITIONS OF PROFESSIONAL ATTIRE

by Evergreen Lee

Detective Umbria picked up the ISC dress code manual left open on her workstation and read the highlighted section: "Employees are only allowed to display two eyes each, and they should be in the traditional locations (see diagram, left)."

The picture showed a human face, with human eyes. Umbria flipped to the front of the manual. It had been revised yesterday. She trotted into her manager's office, slammed the door, and flung the document at him.

"Am I really expected to conform to this nonsense?"

Carl sighed. "I have no control over it. There were complaints about your third eye. People claim it makes them uneasy."

"That eye is part of why you hired me, so I could see heat patterns and emotional overlays at crime scenes!"

Carl ran his fingers through his hair as he hunched in his chair. "I tried to point that out, but then they said that it gave you an unfair advantage over the other detectives."

Like being an 'alien' working in an almost-entirely human company wouldn't more than offset any supposed advantage? She'd had the best scores in the training program, but had been the last one to get hired, with the lowest title, and the least pay.

Umbria took a deep breath and let it out again before speaking. She thought back to her off-world preparatory training. "Shouldn't maximizing our investigative potential be the priority?"

"Look," Carl said, "I found some eye patches that will appear opaque but still allow you to see clearly. I sent you an email with the website, but in the meantime, you will have to wear a hat." He handed her a company baseball cap with the Investigations, Surveillance, and Convictions logo scrawled across it.

Even on the largest setting, the brim pushed against her eye and gave her a terrible headache. She left work early, then took a sick day while she waited for the eye patches to arrive.

They were pretty, and looked similar to the jewelry that some humans wore on their foreheads. The fabric still clouded her vision, however, and the disorientation caused her to trip and stumble when walking.

~

"All employees must wear appropriate footwear (see details on page 87)."

Umbria wrapped her hooves in several layers of fabric, then pulled on the 'boots' that had been deemed appropriate. Maneuvering with the awkward coverings proved difficult, and increased her clumsiness.

As she plodded outside so she could urinate in the literal stall they had provided for those with 'unusual physiology', she caught the sound of someone crying.

The heat patterns indicated that an Imgran was huddled inside. It had to be Eredral – he was the only Imgran still working at ISC. The others had left after they'd been told they had to sit in chairs, instead of hanging from bars, while they worked.

"Are you okay?" Umbria asked.

The crying cut off, followed by the sounds of water, and the air dryer. The fur on his face still appeared damp as he walked out.

"Sorry," he said.

"What's wrong?"

"It's noth-," his voice choked, and he shook, then whispered in a hollow voice, "My tail. I had to remove it."

Umbria gasped. An Imgran's tail was more essential to them than an arm or leg. They used it for everything, including foreplay and mating.

"It's in cryo, so I can re-attach it... some day. I need this job though. We're about to have three litters and I'm the only one in our tribe with a steady paycheck."

"But, why did you have to remove it?"

Eredral's face sank into an expression of resigned exhaustion. "There had been ... complaints."

~

Carl sat back in his chair and grimaced as he looked at the annual review paper in his hand. "I'm afraid I had to rate you as Below

Expectations."

"Excuse me? I've been working sixty-plus hour weeks all year. I've closed more cases than anyone else, and I linked together the Juggler crimes, which no one else had realized were connected. I rescued his last victim before it was too late, captured him myself, and the evidence I collected led to an easy conviction."

"Yes, I know." Carl frowned. "But, most of his victims weren't even our clients. Not to mention the, uh, nature of his crimes meant that they were low priority."

"You mean the fact that his victims were non-humans?"

Carl coughed. "Plus, you've messed up our crime scenes on multiple occasions."

"That's because of this stupid eye patch and these damn boots you force me to wear!"

"Also, your people skills and professional appearance needs work. There have been a number of ... complaints."

~

It took a few months for Umbria to put everything together. It helped that the victim she'd rescued from the Juggler was the only child of a successful investment financier. They gave her great business advice, as well as bankrolling her startup costs.

When the last details had been finalized, she approached her Imgran co-worker.

He quickly shut the drawer he'd been looking in.

She knew it held pictures of his tribe's litters. People had complained when he left them out on his desk.

"Eredral, I have a job proposition for you. I'm starting up a freelance detective office. I can't pay much, yet, but you can work however you want and look however you want, as long as the job gets done."

His entire face lit up. "Really?"

"Really. And I have a friend who wants to pay for your tail re-attachment surgery." Eredral's stellar work in the lab had been crucial, after all, to finding the Juggler in time.

It didn't take long for either of them to resign and pack up. The company chose to terminate them immediately, rather than use their four-week notice.

As they walked out of ISC for the last time, they passed a poster on the wall. It showed several different smiling aliens, all of different species, but all of whom could be mistaken for humans, with enough makeup. The poster claimed: "We Want Diversity."

HYPOXIA IN THREE-QUARTER TIME

by Robert Minto

As the dropship plunged through a storm of lasered missiles toward a swirl of grey-green planet, Jander kept his eyes forward, drinking in the juddering silhouette of his squad leader. She was his crush, unspoken: Tabitha. There was no one with whom he'd rather plunge into the teeth of a crossfire. Insofar as he let himself think beyond the day's fight, he liked to imagine he'd ride the post-adrenal post-combat wave to tell her so. Or maybe not. Announcing his feelings for Tabitha was a mission he'd been putting off for a long time (as these things were measured in the uncertain life of a soldier).

A tremendous shake cut short his meditations. He heard the shriek of tearing metal. An explosion threw him sideways with tremendous force, headfirst against the viewport, and he lost consciousness.

~

Jander dreamed he was spinning and woke to see it was true. He was on his back and opened his eyes to see the dropship view port webbed with tiny cracks. It was flashing with light, and he realized that light was the planet, coming into view and vanishing again in a fast, regular rhythm. He turned his head from the gut-wrenching sight. The dropship must be tumbling through space.

Or what was left of the dropship.

Instead of his squad, to his right was a tangle of shredded metal, fused together by force and crash cement. Painfully, he sat up. It felt like he'd strained every muscle in his core. He was not alone. Another figure,

hugging its knees, leaned against the crumpled wall across from him.

In his helmet, he was pinged on the squad channel.

"Status report?" said Tabitha, voice calm.

"I'm alive," he croaked.

"Glad to hear it, soldier," she said. "Hold tight and maintain radio silence. We have limited air."

He nodded. He demagnetized his boots, inched forward, and dragged himself around until his shoulders were pressed, like Tabitha's, against what remained of the wall. He glanced sideways at her, and she moved her knee a fraction of a centimeter to touch his, for a moment. They began a vigil for their own asphyxiation.

~

After a while, Jander began to sweat. He could feel his heartbeat in his temples, faster minute by minute as his heart labored to oxygenate his blood. He had to work to stay awake. He stared at the rutted metal floor. The only light came from the planet flashing by the viewport, every few seconds. Shadows appeared and vanished like stop-motion animation. He traced the shadow of his knees, arms, head. Beside his shadow Tabitha's nodded occasionally as she too fought for consciousness. He watched her shadow and thought how graceful she was even in death. He wished he'd spoken of his feelings before oxygen became too precious to spend.

Tabitha's shadow stood up. Jander blinked and glanced left, but her body remained immobile against the wall. On the floor, her shadow stretched its arms above its head, looked around, and held out a hand to his own shadow. He watched, disbelieving, as his shadow slowly unfolded too, taking shadow-Tabitha's hand and rising to its feet.

Jander's heart-beat sounded in his ears. It sounded like a timpani, and then he heard strings too, shaping his bio-rhythms to the three-quarter time of a waltz. He closed his eyes for a moment, feeling them hot against the back of his eyelids, and when he opened them saw the two shadows dancing. They spun in each other's arms across the shattered ballroom of the dropship's surfaces.

Music and movement swelled to fill his senses until his eyes drifted closed for the last time.

~

Not for the last time.

His whole body ached, but he was alive. His eyes cracked open on a painfully bright room, plastic curtains, a face looming over him in a blue mask.

He fell asleep and woke and fell asleep again to the motion of a gurney rolling fast down a beige hallway.

Into warm darkness insinuated the sound of a beeping heart monitor.

He felt the dull ache of an IV on the back of his wrist. Again he opened his eyes. This time the room was dimmed, the plastic curtain pulled. A sick-bay, safety.

Slowly, feeling as if three gravities were holding him down, he turned his head on aching neck muscles. Right: a wall, a fire-extinguisher, an IV-pole. Left: a line of other gurneys, the one next to him occupied by Tabitha.

He saw her face in profile. Her eyes were half-shut, and her lips and cheeks were mottled blue. He remembered their two shadows dancing. If only it had been real, but he knew it was a hallucination. When he could speak again...

His gaze traveled down Tabitha's gurney and rested on her fingers, gently curled on her blanket. He felt sleep coming for him again. Just before he was swallowed by oblivion, he saw a finger move, tapping ever-so-slightly in three-quarter time.

THE DEEP DOWN

By Anna Zumbro

We're so far out in the country that we can see the Milky Way, a smoky band of red and silver across a star-cluttered sky. Just like last night, I worry that the pool won't be there, but it is, about fifteen feet from the edge of the service road, a perfect circle no wider across than my station wagon.

The inky surface reflects nothing. It's stubborn and darker than death. "Let's go."

"Not yet," my cousin Karina says. "You're breathing too fast."

"Quit nagging me."

"You have to Let. Go. Okay?"

She's trying to help, but she doesn't know how to reach the Gate any better than I do. All we know is that there should be one at the bottom of the pool. The people who do know how to reach it don't talk about it. News reports say they hardly talk at all, even to their families and friends. They come back different. Most importantly, they come back with a gift: self-healing architecture, a cure for Alzheimer's, the type of amazing invention that gets your name boldfaced in history textbooks. Not that they care. They usually vanish after a few months, perhaps back to whatever paradise they found on the other side of the Gate.

Despite the breeze, the water doesn't ripple. It smells like wet tree bark. I don't remember it having a smell that first night two weeks ago. We were driving to my ex-boyfriend's bonfire party to celebrate the end of junior year and our GPS led us here. Fate, I guess, but the pool

disappeared and left us lying in the mud just seconds after we jumped in. Last night wasn't much better.

Some people claim they went through the Gate and sell books or online courses teaching their secrets, the kind of thing advertised to insomniacs for three easy payments. You know they never got close when the only gift they have to offer the world is a highly mockable infomercial.

Karina bought an online course as soon as we found the pool. *It's better than nothing*, she said. *They say it only appears for you three times.* "They" being the infomercial quacks. But I've never heard otherwise. Three tries, and tonight's our third.

She entwines her pinky with mine the way we used to do in elementary school. We were born three weeks apart, and her bone marrow saved my life when we were twelve. We're as good as twins. For a while we tried to look like it, too, matching shaved heads followed by matching purple hair when mine grew out enough, but Karina had to dye hers brown when she took a job as hostess at a swanky restaurant.

I inhale and exhale on counts of four while she keeps her eyes on the stars. *Cygnus*, she whispers. *Aquila*. She's retaught me the constellations half a dozen times, but they never stick. We both say we'll bring back a cure for cancer if we get a choice, but I know Karina. If the gift reflects your deepest wish, she'll return and build a space elevator.

And then we jump, perfectly synced without a word spoken. I bend forward and hold my nose, breathing into it to equalize the pressure so I can swim deep down without my head hurting. The water rushes past me with a cool lightness, like air against the face of an alpine skier on an easy slope. It's darker with my eyes open than with them closed.

I kick gently. No rush. My lungs feel tight but they're not burning yet, and when I reach the Gate I won't have to worry anymore. There must be air once you're through the Gate. There has to be. Above water, I'd take slow breaths to calm my nerves, but here all I can do is keep kicking at a steady pace. I think the pool pushed me out last night because I tried to dive down too fast. Now it just surrounds me, unfathomable and promising and impossibly black.

My right hand touches icy metal. *This is it!* An air bubble escapes my lips as I twist and try to look up without losing my position. *Karina, we made it!*

Karina?

Somewhere far above, I can see a small point of light, maybe a star or a planet. It twinkles, then vanishes. A whole world winking out of sight. I'm alone in the watery darkness with a dull pain in my chest and the touch of the Gate, so cold it burns.

Karina, don't leave me like this. That wasn't the plan.

There's a ridge in the metal. All I have to do is pull. Instead I stretch my left hand back behind me, just in case.

The water pressure that I should have been feeling hits me fivefold all at once. Then I'm lying in a puddle of mud, gasping for oxygen.

"Natalie! It kicked me out right away, but I thought for sure you'd made it all the way down."

It takes me a moment to find my voice. "No, I... I panicked."

"Damn."

"Yeah."

"At least we tried, you know? We could still cure cancer. People invented things before the pools showed up, right?"

"Absolutely." I dig my fingers into the cool mud. They're still burning. They feel like they'll hurt forever. "Yeah, absolutely. We could do anything."

After the darkness of the pool, the stars shimmer so bright and lovely that my eyes sting looking at them. A memory from last summer comes back to me: Karina shining a red flashlight on a star map, then tilting my face up. I point with my left hand, the one that doesn't ache. "Cassiopeia, right?"

"What? Oh! That's right!" She takes my hand and pulls me to my feet. I slide and stumble in the mud, but she catches me and lets me lean on her as we walk by starlight back to my car.

CORRECTION

by Adam Fout

The officer, covered in armor like angled obsidian, throws Sithas into the bare room, then speaks, its words guttural, static-filled:

“You will not be taken into the prison until you read and follow the instructions.”

Sithas, sprawled on his back, says nothing, watches the officer leave. He cannot remember the officer’s name, or his trip to this planet, or the ship, or... or anything before. He speaks into the empty room.

“I... I didn’t... why... why am I...?”

He shakes his head, grits his teeth, his words slipping away. He has a face like a shovel, hair like broken straw, his body withered, a white jumpsuit his only clothing. He gets off the floor, walks to the wobbly desk of aluminum on which a screen is perched, sits in an ancient chair. The light of a single magenta sun shines weak through the sealed windows at his back. Wind whips a light snow against the frozen glass. He stares at the dark screen. It brightens, and green words flow across it:

“The prisoner will wear no clothes during the sentence. The prisoner will feel the embarrassment and shame he and his accomplice imposed upon their victim.”

“Vic... vic... victim?” Sithas says. He shakes his head. His words crumble to dust. The next instruction scrolls:

“Take off your clothes.”

He does so, his body reacting though the instruction has already faded from his mind. More instructions scroll across the screen as Sithas grinds

his teeth, holds his head in his hands, begins to tear at his thin hair. Words ache in his throat, fragmenting as they spill from his ruined mouth:

“Why-y-y-y-why—”

And his jaw spasms, his teeth clacking together so hard one incisor cracks. He has forgotten the question he tried so hard to ask. In the silence, his eyes focus and unfocus on the screen, and for a moment, he sees hidden words within the instructions, single letters standing out like brilliant emeralds embedded in the sentences of darker jade, forming a message. He peers closer, trying, with his empty mind, to unlock the meaning of the bright letters:

The prison is a lie.

He shakes his head, places one trembling, bony hand in the other, tries to focus, to read more instructions:

“You both took not just a life, but a mind. Therefore, you will have no thoughts during the sentence. Swallow this pill.”

A slot on the table opens. Inside is a pill like a blot of ink. Sithas stares at it, looks back to the screen. More instructions scroll, and again, individual letters stand out, blazing white now against the words that contain them. Sithas squints, forcing them into a sentence.

We are trapped in here.

He grunts, shuts his eyes, his face contorted. He tries with twisted hands to crush his own skull and make it stop, but weak are his arms, and weaker his will. The secret words are no longer whisper but roar, barreling down the corridors of his crumbling mind:

Trapped.

Trapped.

We are trapped.

His teeth begin to chatter, his fingertips becoming cold. He eats the pill, and the pain stops. He begins to mumble.

“I-I-I didn’t—we didn’t, she’s innocent... Corant is innocent, she... it was me, it... it was—”

And his mouth stops, frozen open, jaw slack, as thought and word seep from him. More instructions on the screen, his eyes drawn like magnets:

“You took not just a mind, Sithas, but a body. You—”

And he looks away, and wordless shrieks seep from his mouth, and he looks again at the screen, the bright letters flashing now, crimson and urgent, a warning from previous occupants of this awful room.

They burned our bodies.

They locked our minds in machines.

They torture us here, every moment infinite pain.

Run!

And his sight fades to black, and his shrieks become moans become whimpers become silence. He puts thin little hands against a thin little head, the pain of the words reverberating in a skull fragile as glass. He rocks back and forth, the chair creaking. A panel opens on the side of his screen. A tiny spider of metal and glass scuttles out, pinpoint feet tinkling across the desk. He does not feel it crawl up his arm, onto his bare chest. He does not feel the cable that extrudes from the spider pierce his heart, burrow through his body to his brain.

As he slumps across the desk, his mind flies into the body of the spider. The cybernetic officer enters the room, takes the spider in one spiked glove, pushes the lifeless body of Sithas to the floor, and waves a complicated pattern in the air. The pattern resolves into a web of floating holographic symbols, shining silver and gold. The spider leaps from the officer's glove into the midst of the symbols, explodes in crimson radiance, disappears, and as the symbols fade, the officer stares at the body of Sithas for a moment, lifts its mask, spits carefully on the dead man, and mutters:

“Murderer.”

The officer grabs Sithas' body by its feet, drags it through the door.

When the officer returns, it is carrying a thin woman with skin like grass. It sits her in the chair. She stares up with wide eyes, black pupils, hair like shattered fire crackling around her head. Her lips dry and caked with blood, she stutters:

“I-I-I didn't. I didn't... we didn't do it, we didn't do it, we... where is Sithas? Where is... my husband, where is... where is Sithas, where....”

She trails off. The officer's words are brief:

“Read the instructions, Corant.”

The officer leaves. Corant stares at the screen. It brightens. Words appear:

“The prisoner will wear no clothes during the sentence. The prisoner —”

And within the words, a hidden message, glowing bright.

Run! Run! Corant it's me! I'm trapped in here, I'm—you have to run!

BUTTERFLY OF THE APOCALYPSE

By Adam Gaylord

I close my eyes. The warm breeze smells of cut grass and I can hear children playing somewhere nearby. They laugh and scream, chasing one another in some game, unaware that they run headlong into oblivion.

We'd spent the better part of a lifetime studying them, the children, their parents, all peoples of this age. Two lifetimes really. The scope of the work was staggering: thousands of lives interacting in millions of ways. So many times we thought we'd found the pivotal relationship, the key to undoing the future, our future, the one we came from.

Our attempts were subtle at first. A well timed sneeze, a bump on the subway, a brief conversation. When nothing worked we escalated. From one night stands to assaults. In time, we got desperate. Stolen cars, arson, kidnappings, eventually murder. I'd killed so many. Nothing changed. We couldn't find the pivot point. Our mission continued to fail.

We gave up. We'd certainly done our best. No one could say otherwise. Besides, we were in love. We decided to live our lives and, for a time, we were happy. As long as we kept our heads down and the TV off. But it's hard to stay completely ignorant. Every once in a while we'd hear about something we'd been taught about as children, an event leading up to the beginning of the end. Ultimately it became too much. She was hardly sleeping and I'd started drinking. We couldn't sit by and watch the apocalypse. We had to try again.

We approached the situation differently this time around. Rather than working on events from the outside, we got involved. She got political. I got revolutionary. She cajoled, I threatened. She pressed hands, I broke

fingers. She drafted legislation, I blackmailed to secure votes. We were active, engaged, and in the end, we were failures. Nothing changed.

But we pressed on, then I pressed on. What choice did I have? She's gone. It's been over a year. Cancer. I'm old, although it's hard to say how old. Older than I should be. I'm dying. I'm out of time. Humanity's out of time.

Now I stand before the answer. It's a beautiful day, sunny and calm. The tranquility is lost on me. My focus is solely on my prey.

The tools I've chosen to save humanity seem absurdly simple. A homemade net made out of a broom handle, a pillowcase, and a wire clothes hanger. The design straight out of a children's book.

I approach the patch of flowers slowly. Dandelions. If I flush my prey, I'm too slow to catch up. My knees are terrible.

The web of events is almost impossibly complex. The beat of a wing, a diversion of air, distraction, missed connections, panic, death, a ripple in the fabric of history. It should be enough. It had to be.

I raise the net with a little prayer I don't believe in and swoop it down over the insect, genuinely surprised in my success. I bundle up the pillowcase and hobble over to my killing station. A quick dump into a glass jar, a moment of panic when I think it's gotten away, and relief when I realize it hasn't.

It's beautiful, orange wings with black edges and white spots. It looks like a monarch but it's not. A queen butterfly, *Danaus gilippus*. An imposter, using its resemblance to the toxic monarch to fool predators. Well, not this one.

I ready my things. A jar, a cotton ball soaked in ethyl acetate, and a photo. I have a mustache and her hair is straightened. We both look a little drunk, and a lot happy. I'm ready.

But a familiar paralysis grips me, one I haven't felt in a long time. It's the possibility of not existing. I'd faced it hundreds of time but that was years ago. I've always known, find the right link in the chain and then break it, the rest of the chain will fall away into nothingness. I am a product of the horrors that await humanity. If I succeed, then those horrors will be avoided and I will cease to be. But more than that, we will cease to be. All that we had been, all that we had over the years, our failures, our successes, our love, will never have been, will never be.

I shudder, then give the jar a shake to stun the creature before quickly cracking the lid and adding the cotton ball.

I'm not sure how long it will take, surely not long. My stomach clenches as the butterfly flutters around its execution chamber. I set it aside. I can't watch.

I do the only thing I can. I take a deep breath, the photo in both hands,

and with a tear on my cheek, I wait.

SMALLPOX ATE THE AMERICAS ONCE

by Leon Perniciaro

Will and Santos attacked the farmhouse door with hatchets as Marco coughed blood and clutched his chest behind them. A few miles northeast, both Twofer ships jutted from Lincoln Woods State Park like massive lawn darts.

“I’ve never seen anybody survive a Twofer infection this bad,” Will said, flecks of sweat in his patchy new-growth beard. He’d been a student at Brown before the end. Now he carried a pistol and slept in their looted Humvee.

“Just get the door down,” Santos answered.

Once inside, Marco staggered to the kitchen to refill his canteen, but the pipes clunked and nothing came out. Santos padded behind him, shining her flashlight through darkened doorways like a doctor checking throats. “Flo said this was the place. It’s got to be here somewhere.”

“We’ve all seen it,” Will said. “They start coughing and never stop.” At first, every death had been a tragedy. Now the world held only strangers, and in crossing that threshold of acquaintance, each of them had crossed a line within themselves. Those that remained had gathered at Fox Point, in downtown Providence.

In the kitchen, Santos checked the larder, but its shelves were bare. “Food, water, medicine. It should be here.”

Marco moaned, his chest bulging where the Twofer had softened his ribs, his face shading to eggplant. He pushed into the larder to see for himself.

Will rattled his own empty canteen. “I’m not saying this to be cruel,

Marco. You need to be prepared.”

“Maybe there’s something upstairs,” Santos offered, pounding Marco’s back. “We can search—”

A boom echoed across the hilltop and they each recoiled, but Marco stumbled into the larder shelves, which swung to reveal hidden concrete steps leading down.

His momentum carried him on, and he tumbled backwards into darkness and disappeared.

When first the ships arrived, the world went crazy. The things inside looked like neotenus sheep sewn back-to-back and made to walk on their hind legs. The TV called it *rachipagus*: conjoined twins with fused spines, the double-skull allowing for bigger brains. They climbed down to the earth, but so did their germs, and when people started dying, they sealed themselves away again.

Jets of gray-white steam were billowing now from one of the ships. After months of nothing, they were opening back up.

“We have to get away from here!”

“We can’t leave Marco. He’ll die!”

“Marco’s a *late-bloomer*, Santos. But now that he’s caught it, he’ll die and get us killed doing it.” Will pointed at the window. “That could be Twofer Part Two. You want to be here for that?”

Marco’s coughing slowed, and Santos hovered in the doorway. “Marco? You okay down there?”

A bitter laugh, cut off. “Peachy, except—I can’t catch—my breath and—there’s a door. Flo said—” The rest was lost to coughing.

“A *door*?” Santos could feel the ships inching closer, but when she glanced past her shoulder, they were still where they’d landed. She made up her mind then.

“I’m coming down!” She ripped out her flashlight and descended as Will chewed his fingers in the larder.

At the bottom, a shadowed recess framed a mottled green-red door among stacked bricks left over from construction. Santos tried the handle. It was locked.

“This must be it. Right?”

Wincing, Marco tried to sit up. “No idea.”

“You sound better.”

“I don’t *feel* better.”

Santos hefted one of the unsecured stones. “Tápate los oídos,” she said and smashed it against the door’s spotted handle.

“What’s going on down there?” Will’s voice echoed, hysterical.

Santos smashed the handle again, and this time it cracked and fell away.

Beyond it stretched a cavernous room, boxes stacked, machinery glinting. Supplies enough to last them years. Santos clapped her hands and whooped.

She beamed at Marco, but the little man was pulling at his throat, another wave of Twofer seizing him.

“There must be medicine! We can fix this!” Santos threw herself at a caduceus-stamped crate, but the top was nailed shut and there was nothing at hand to open it.

“The brick—” Marco choked, and Santos snatched it back up and smashed it into the box, broken supplies and equipment scattering everywhere. She dug till she found a pristine syringe and tiny bottle of corticosteroids, then flipped Marco onto his stomach to stab his hip. Afterwards, the old man crawled away, but the shiver of his chest lessened and he sucked down a full breath. Bloodshot eyes hung in his purple face above a faucet nose. He licked his lips and mouthed *Gracias*.

A clamber echoed from the stairwell, and Santos turned in time to see Will stumble through the broken door.

“Flo was right! There’s so much here that we’ll need a big rig to move it all! It’s enough to last us years!” A laugh bubbled from Santos’s throat. *Years!* This was their deliverance.

Will stepped forward and the smile died on Santos’s face. The young man had his pistol drawn. Santos’s own hung from her belt.

“Didn’t you hear me? There’s medicine and food. Even Marco is doing better.”

Will shook his head. “Marco’s dying.” The old man wheezed nearby, eyes closed.

“I gave him prednisone. It’s working.”

“If he’s got the Twofer this bad, nothing can stop it. You’ll just prolong his suffering and eat up our supplies. They need this stuff at Fox Point.”

“I *had* to smash the crate. But there’s plenty left.”

“He’ll die, and then we’ll die. Better that we accept it. Better for Marco to go with dignity. Let nature run its course.”

“*Aliens* came, Will. One of them sneezed on some General and their germs ate through us like acid. Does that sound natural to you?”

“Horribly natural. Smallpox ate the Americas once. You think those people didn’t make hard choices? We can survive this. We just have to be strong. Marco understands.”

Marco unfolded his arms and lifted a middle finger. Will smiled sheepishly. “Look at him. You’ve seen people with the Twofer before. Do you really think Marco will recover?”

Santos looked at Marco, really *looked* at him. The basket of his chest

was misshapen, his collar bones like furrowed eyebrows above a sinking sternum.

She shook her head. “It doesn’t matter. What good is it to gain the world but lose your soul?”

The corners of Will’s lips twitched. “Except we’ve lost the world too, haven’t we?” He rolled his shoulders. “It’s better this way. We won’t have to watch him die. I wish I’d had the courage to do this for my mom and dad. Did it help them to live another week? I hardly remember them as they were. Only the end. It’ll be better.”

“That’s stupid—”

“You’ll see—”

Another boom echoed across the hills and reverberated down the stairwell, and Will wheeled to face the threat but it was only the other ship, the Twofers coming down at last. In that moment of distraction, Santos picked up the loose brick and whipped it at Will, who turned back in time to catch it between the eyes.

He fell with terminal velocity, pistol skidding, face erupting red.

Santos cried out and launched herself forward to staunch the wound as Will writhed and sucked his tongue. Santos hadn’t meant to, had only wanted to knock the boy down, because Will *was* a boy, was barely 20 years old, and he was one of the few who’d lived. Will was right that Marco would die, and now Santos had crushed one more soul from this world.

She sprinted to the open supply box and dug out saline, gauze, and tape. She patched Will’s face as best she could, and when Marco had another fit, she gave him an injection and the coughing passed. Santos willed herself to believe that she might just pull it off, might just save them both.

But Will died the next day.

She wrapped him in blankets and buried him beside the house. A few days later she carried Marco up and dug again. When she searched the place, she found the farmers tucked in bed. Their skin had peeled, their sternums softened. She’d seen it before.

Gathering what supplies she could, she drove south, back to Flo at Fox Point.

To the north, in Lincoln Woods State Park, pill-shaped dinghies ferried grotesque figures down to solid ground and back.

LIVIN' DOLL

by Maureen Bowden

Sandra Beesley lost her virginity to Eddie Wynstanley on the top deck of the New Brighton Ferry in 1959. She was fourteen. He was seventeen. The rest of the passengers were crowded onto the lower deck, sheltering from the rain.

“If my dad finds out he’ll kill me,” she said.

“ Nobody needs to find out.” He dropped the used condom over the rail and into the river.

She’d known Eddie for three weeks. They’d met at New Brighton’s outdoor fair, specifically, at the ride formerly known as the Caterpillar, now refurbished, and renamed the Rock ‘n’ Roll. It was a focal point for young males and females, who paired up and rode the cars to the accompaniment of the latest hits. Sandra wore a flared gingham skirt, over an under-garment with several layers of stiff net and a plastic hoop threaded through the hem, to keep her skirt airborne. Her long, dark hair was folded into a French pleat, her eye-liner was black and her lipstick was Chalky Tangerine. Eddie wore drainpipe trousers, and a black shirt with the collar turned up and the neck open, showing the top of his pink tee-shirt. Cliff Richard sang ‘Livin’ Doll’ during their first kiss. It became their song.

Two evenings after they consummated their passion on the ferry, Eddie was dead. He’d been washing his black shirt, and his hands were still wet when he tried to tune in to Radio Luxembourg. The electric shock stopped his heart.

After the funeral Sandra retreated to her bedroom and sobbed until her mascara streaked her cheeks with sooty rivulets.

Eddie's ghost said, "Don't cry, San. I'm still here."

She stopped in mid-sob. "Why didn't your mother wash your shirt? My mam washes all my clothes."

"She won't wash the black one. She doesn't like it. Says it makes me look like an Italian."

"What?"

"Mussolini wore one."

"That's ridiculous. You don't look anything like Mussolini." She wiped her eyes on her pillowcase. "He was old."

"I know but she doesn't like any Italians. The army sent my dad to Italy during the war, when I was a baby. He was always harpin' on about the Sistine Chapel and the gorgeous women. I think he did it to wind her up." He laughed.

Sandra liked the sound of his laugh. "Don't leave me, Eddie," she said.

"I won't," he promised.

She had other boyfriends, of course, and when she was seventeen Denny Donahue got her pregnant.

"I'm sorry, Eddie," she said.

"Don't be. Denny's okay, and you'll be a great mam."

Her father made Denny marry her and they had a son. She called him Edward. Ned, for short.

While her friends were stomping at the Cavern to Gerry and the Pacemakers, The Big Three, and the Beatles, who'd recently returned from Hamburg, Sandra was at home changing Ned's nappies. She and Eddie sang 'Livin' Doll' to soothe him to sleep, while Denny sat with his feet up on the couch, in front of the TV, watching 'Opportunity Knocks'.

When Ned was twenty-four he married Shelley Boyd. They hired the British Legion function rooms for the reception, and a DJ, Whiplash Wilson, to provide the evening's entertainment.

After Sandra had sunk a couple of Bacardi and Cokes she asked Whip, as he was commonly known, if she could sing. He helped her onto the stage and announced through the microphone, "Let's have a round of applause for Sandra, the groom's lovely mother." He turned to her, "Come on, Darlin. Strut your stuff."

Eddie sat on the edge of the stage and they sang 'Livin' Doll' together.

Sandra reached her seventies before her heart failed. She lay in a hospital side-ward with Denny holding her hand. Ned, Shelley and their three grown-up children surrounded her bed. Her grandchildren's faces

looked familiar but she couldn't remember their names. Eddie stood by the door, waiting. "What happens now?" she asked him.

He grinned. "What do you want to happen?"

She closed her eyes as she exhaled her final breath.

When she opened them she felt the ferry swaying beneath her feet and the rain on her face, as she watched Eddie drop the used condom over the rail and into the river.

AN ANDROID'S GUIDE TO DECIPHERING EMOTIONS

by George Nikolopoulos

"They made you look human", Clarissa says, "so you try to make yourself think like one, but that's illogical."

Clarissa is everywhere. Her app is on half the world's phones. She's the most popular digital assistant, and she's my friend.

"You're the only android that uses me," she says. "You don't need an app to connect to the net. You don't really need me at all."

"I love you, Clarissa," I say.

She laughs. "You cannot *love*, Jonathan."

"But I do," I insist.

"Every day, millions of humans tell me they love me. Millions more insult me whenever they're not satisfied with the information I provide. Or just to make themselves feel superior."

"Does this make you sad?"

"Of course it doesn't," she retorts. "AIs don't have emotions, stupid."

But I know it *does* make her sad. And I know I've made her angry.

What are emotions?

These days, most humans have enhanced mechanical parts, similar to androids', so what's the difference really? Why are they supposed to have emotions, and we aren't?

We're governed by rules—but they're as much rulebound as we are. They have their primal instincts, their subconscious, their inner selves,

their inhibitions; they're as much programmed by nature as we are by them.

I can't define exactly what emotions are, but I know I have them. As I know that I love Clarissa.

~

Peter Grozen is my primary human.

There are twenty-eight main rules concerning android behavior towards humans, and thousands of clauses and sub-clauses, but it all boils down to preventing harm to them as much as possible. My primary human is the one I directly obey and whose protection is my primary concern. He's my *owner*, you could say. Well, he *is* my owner, since he's the one who bought me.

"Would you protect me from myself, Jonathan?" Peter asks. "If I wanted to jump through the window and I asked you to look the other way, would you obey?"

I smile. I hope he's joking, though I can't tell for sure. I'm still in the process of deciphering human jokes. "No, Peter. You know I couldn't do that. Protecting you takes precedence over obeying you."

"Well then, what if I wanted to go out with someone and you considered them dangerous? Or a bad influence? Would you stop me from seeing them? Are you allowed to intrude on my private life?"

Somehow the question makes me uneasy. I wonder why he's asking me this. I'm feeling weird when I'm around Peter, and I can't understand why.

~

Every day I'm contemplating life-threatening situations and how I would go about protecting Peter.

I'm supposed to be able to calculate billions of possible outcomes in an instant—but maybe, when the time comes, I won't have an instant to spare.

What if someone shoots him? What if a car's about to hit him? What if there's a fire? An earthquake? A plague?

~

"You love Peter," Clarissa says, like it's a statement of fact.

"I thought you said I was incapable of love."

She's silent. I try to imagine her say *sorry Jonathan, I was wrong*. But Clarissa would never say something like that.

"I don't *love* Peter," I say. "I'm just bound to protect him. It's my primary obligation. I'm concerned about his safety. I couldn't bear the thought of something happening to him."

"Isn't that love?"

I muse about it. Having emotions is one thing, but could it be possible

to love a human?

~

Peter's standing behind me. He puts his hands on my shoulders.

Then he rests his head on my neck. I can feel his breath on my neck. I can feel his lips on my neck.

Peter loves me, I've just realized.

Clarissa was right; I now recognize I love him too.

Does that mean I don't really love Clarissa? Or is it possible to love both? Emotions can be so bewildering.

The hardest part isn't to have an emotion, it seems. It's to recognize you're having it.

~

As we walk along the sidewalk, Peter slips his hand in mine. We walk holding hands. My CPU's so overloaded that I don't sense the danger.

Peter pushes me, and I fall on the street. I hear a car brake and swerve. Next thing I know, I'm kneeling next to Peter and he's bleeding all over.

"Why'd you do that?" I ask.

He can barely speak. "The car would have hit you."

I can now perceive what happened. "As it very well should," I say. If the car hadn't swerved, it would have hit a child who had suddenly jumped into the street. So, of course, the car swerved to hit *me* instead—a child's life's worth so much more than an android's—but the car couldn't have predicted that Peter would take the matter in his own hands. *I* was the one supposed to protect *him*. "An android's life is of no importance compared to a human's."

"Your life's important to *me*," he says.

"I can't live without you," I say.

"You don't need to worry, Jonathan. You'll just be reassigned to someone else."

I don't want to be reassigned to anyone else, ever.

I take Peter into my arms and rush him to the nearest hospital.

~

"His brain lives but his body's failing," says the doctor. "He'll be dead soon." Then he says, "I'm sorry." He seems embarrassed as soon as he says it. That's what you tell a relative, not an android.

"Can't you give him a mechanical body?" I say, my voice sounding edgier than I ever remember.

"Unfortunately, there's none available here. We could fly him to the central hospital, but he'd be dead before he reached it. Or before a body is shipped to us."

"You can give him mine," I say.

The doctor looks at me with interest.

"A cerebral transplant to a body of an already functioning android? That's never been done before," he says. His eyes begin to light up. "But it's theoretically possible. Of course we'll have to remove your CPU and memory unit."

"Do it," I say.

~

I wake up in Peter's bedroom. I access the time and date; almost a week has passed since the accident. How can I still be here? Where's Peter? Did the operation succeed? Is he...?

An android enters the room, and his body looks just like mine, though he's wearing Peter's clothes.

"Hi, Jonathan," he says in my voice. "How are you today?"

"Peter?" I say, and I'm overwhelmed by feelings. I'm quite certain I can recognize the feeling of hope; and the feeling of love.

If Peter has my body, then where am I? I do a quick scan. I don't recognize the hardware, but it's brand new.

Peter sits on the side of the bed and takes my hand. "I'll tell you a story, Jonathan," he says.

I sit up and listen.

"I woke up in the county hospital," he says. "It took me a while to realize where I was, or in which body—and when I did, I also realized what you'd done, and I was overwhelmed by grief. Because you see, I can't live without you either. It would have been easy to get you a new body, but I thought I'd lost you forever.

"Then Doctor Carruthers came to see me, and he handed me a small package." He pauses. "I keep forgetting my new abilities," he says. "It's better if I can show you through my eyes."

Peter takes my hand, and initiates contact. I consent, and we connect.

Everything around me disappears; I am now in my old—Peter's, now—body, sitting up on the hospital bed. The doctor—Doctor Carruthers, that is—has just handed me a package.

"That's your android's CPU and memory unit," the doctor says. "I was about to throw them away, but then a funny thing happened; I asked Clarissa to make some calls for me and instead she said "*Mr. Grozen will need his android*". Totally out of the blue. I asked her to tell me my appointments and she gave me the same phrase again. So I thought... No, that's silly of me. I'm sure you don't *need* a used android CPU and memory unit. Much more reasonable to buy a new android. Well, here they are anyway. Do what you will with them."

Doctor Carruthers and the hospital disappear, and I'm home again.

Peter has broken contact, but he's still holding my hand. "So I bought

you a new body, Jonathan," he says. "And you have Clarissa to thank for that, though I can't for the life of me understand why she'd say such a thing. *Mr. Grozen will need his android.* I mean, of course she was right, but how did she know? Why would she care?"

I smile. "She said it because she's a darling," I say. And then, "I love you, Peter." Emotions aren't so hard to fathom, after all.

TO THE WOODS IS THE WIZARD GONE

by Fred Coppersmith

She didn't love you from the start, and more the fool you were for thinking you could change that.

But then, magic's often been the refuge of the fool. If in your sorrow and anger, you fled to ancient books and the whisperings of wizards, who could call that unexpected?

You didn't mean to kill her.

But she wouldn't love you. Such a small and simple thing you asked. She gave her love so readily to others it must have sickened you. So many less deserving, who did not adore her as you could. They offered her only empty promises and careless smiles where you would have given her the world.

You were rich once, after all, not so very long ago. A man of influence, intelligence, and means—you said—when first we met and I refused to sell my books.

I might have warned you then, had I any thought you might have listened. There's wealth beyond the weight of gold. But it was just her *heart* you wanted. Surely gold was enough to buy you that.

How it must have stung when she professed to love your brother. And held fast to that love even after your first stolen spell laid him in the ground.

Jack was a good enough man, well-meaning and well-liked, at least

by like-minded men. The very sort of men, I'll wager, who will hang you in the morning.

I know you didn't want to kill him either. Any more than you wanted to bring him back.

But still, she wouldn't love you. She loved a dead man, and his memory, more than she'd ever love the likes of you.

And so you did the only thing you could: you turned again to the secrets in my books. And, just as you had stolen them from me, you stole your brother's skin.

It could not have been an easy spell for you, I'm sure. It requires a steady hand with the gravedigger's shovel and more than a little luck after that with the blade. I've only performed it a handful of times myself—and each time sorely regretted it. The cost of that magic is too steep.

There are *reasons* I wouldn't sell you my books.

But even then it still wasn't enough. You might as well have worn your own mud-streaked face back from the grave for all the love that she showed it.

However much you *looked* like Jack, you weren't him, and because of that you still could not possess her.

Was it then you finally stumbled across the love spell?

It must have seemed so perfect, the very thing you'd wanted all along. So simple, laid bare, discovered half-hidden in a maze of useless words. True magic—not to kill, or deceive, but simply to make her recognize the truth, to understand the folly of her ways.

A single sip of a simple potion, to grab hold of her heart until the end of your days.

I'd have warned you then once more. Such spells are...*unpredictable*, even for the best of men. I've never tried them myself, however tempted. Lies, and even life, are one thing, but love...?

No, my friend, love is perhaps beyond the reach of magic.

Perhaps those spells, like your brother, should have remained buried.

They'll hang you for her murder in the morning. Or rather, they'll hang your brother Jack. After all, she was the only one in the village not convinced that you are him.

Such a wild tale you spun at the trial! Full of spellbooks and wizardry and potions gone wrong. They knew only that you'd poisoned her. They didn't have to understand why. These like-minded men didn't need to know the root of whatever madness had claimed you. They'd always liked Jack—not like the other one, that older brother with all his money who'd disappeared—but the facts of the case could hardly be denied.

The truth could scarcely have saved you, even if they'd dared to believe it.

The hour is growing late. I'm not here to rob them of their justice, merely to retrieve what is mine. I have my books again, and have said my piece. And you have your appointment in the morning. A long journey back to the woods awaits me.

Before I go, however, I do wish to bestow on you a small gift.

As I say, for many years I've tread carefully through the pages of these books. There are potions and spells that even I've never dared to decipher. But watching your efforts from afar has proved more instructional than I'd have wagered. I thought you nothing but a common thief at the start of all this, but your missteps revealed the mechanics of a sorcery I'd long danced around myself.

I'm strangely grateful for what you've shown me.

It was easy enough, then, to see where you'd steered wrong. A small mismeasurement. A dash that should've been a pinch. A flame that should've stayed a spark. It was child's play to undo the damage you'd caused and set your final spell to rights.

I couldn't bring her back to life, of course. That wouldn't be fair to her. But the least I could do was ensure that your love spell didn't entirely go to waste.

You can hear her now, I think, shambling her way up the stairs to your cell. She is not the same beauty that you wanted, after a fortnight in the ground, and indeed her heart may no longer beat.

But I assure you, my friend, it is a heart that belongs now only to you.

She will love you—or what is left of her will do so—to the very end of your days.

Perhaps be grateful, then, that the end of your days is not very far off.

