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Editor's Note:

It's December, and you know what that means: nightmares, death, mayhem, and a suburban zombie wasteland. Also the vending machines of the future.

Okay, this might not be the most traditional holiday collection. But there is a special guest appearance from one of the season's biggest stars. Consider yourself warned.

So grab a big ol' cup of eggnog (or hot cocoa, if you are like me and find the idea of putting undeveloped chicken embryos in beverages disgusting), throw another log on the fire (and remember, if your landlord has a problem with that, then that parsimonious party-pooper should have installed a fireplace in your apartment), and curl up with some good stories.

— Laura Garrison

AetherHex

Petar Simonovic

"*****no change*****." The automat whirred, chugged and released the can, which thunked into the tray.

Clyde stooped. The serratus posterior inferior muscle on the right-hand side of his back twitched. His blue tie swung away from his chest as he pushed his arm through the hard plastic flap.

The can was warmer than the ambient temperature in the corridor. Clyde rose and held it up to the ceiling lamps, squinted as he rotated it. Scratches and dents marred the red metal, dull in the jaundiced light. Clyde took his magnifying glass from the inside pocket of his grey suit jacket and scanned it across the can. The metal swelled and subsided in the lens. The sell-by date bulged into focus. Clyde sighed through his nose and put the can on top of the vending machine.

The automat's oblong LCD display blinked. Calculator letters scrolled across it in electric red. "*****no change*****use exact amount*****."

Clyde took his clipboard from the top of the machine and flipped through pastel-coloured forms.

"Can exhibits damage," he wrote under the Merchandising section. "Goods out of date."

"*****snacks and drinks*****," the machine's display blinked and scrolled. "*****sandwiches and pastries*****."

"Display text incorrectly advertises availability of bakery goods."

The automat's refrigeration deck spattered a miasma of insectoid pops and chirps on the corridor's woollen silence.

*****ice cold*****."

Clyde opened the can, took a thermometer from his inside pocket and dipped it into the drink. He counted. The automat stridulated, its discordant chirrups sang high and hysterical. At thirty he withdrew the thermometer and rapped it against the can's rim. The machine purred, a long murmur that ended in a clang. He raised the thermometer to the light, wiped it, put it back in his pocket and reached for the clipboard.

"Sample temperature: 22 degrees. Potential for consumer dissatisfaction: high."

*****no change*****sandwiches*****."

Clyde flipped the paper on the clipboard to a sheet of stickers, each stamped with LZYP-7.8.15.19.20, his employee number. The stickers were arranged in three vertical columns: green ones labelled "Passed", yellow ones labelled "Service". Clyde wrote the date on a red one. He added the machine's audit code: XIZI-BWFZ-PVGP-STBL-FONF.

The machine's display was blank.

Clyde sighed through his nose. Of the hundreds of automats he had surveyed in the hotel, of the hundreds more to come, this one, an obsolete Maruman Kraken Vend from the long-defunct Lobo Corp, was way below average, yet not quite inadequate enough to prove memorable. In the months ahead he would forget its frail refrigeration deck, shoddy merchandising and inept communication as he encountered automats that distinguished themselves through superiority or truly broken woefulness.

*****sandwiches*****refreshing ice cold drinks*****," the Maruman said, unable to fulfil either promise.

Clyde patted the sticker onto its faux wood side panel, let his hand linger. It wasn't the Maruman's fault no one made parts for it anymore. With care it might have survived another three, maybe even five, years.

He took his hand from the red "Failed" sticker.

"*****change given*****," the Maruman said, utterly unfit for purpose.

Clyde placed the clipboard in his briefcase, took the can from the top of the machine and walked on down the corridor. No light or sound leaked from the doors he passed. It was the hotel's off-season, and the vast complex was all but deserted. Thousands of rooms lay empty and dark. There was supposed to be a skeleton crew of staff on hand, but Clyde had seen no employees in the months since the audit began.

The next automat he had to survey on this floor was an AetherHeX Zeus Magnet, a model that had pioneered a suite of innovative retail solutions. Its viewer analytics could identify individuals and merchandise according to purchase history. Its engaging chatbot functionality farmed consumer data and shared it wirelessly with all other Zeus Magnets. Its refrigeration deck, sober and silent, never wavered from faithful adherence to the optimum.

Clyde's serratus inferior posterior had cantered when he saw Zeus Magnets listed on the project brief: he had never encountered one in the wild before. AetherHeX had withdrawn the model years ago because of explosive flaws in the humidity modulator. But this hotel had failed to replace its fleet. The machines had probably been forgotten amid the sheer vastness of the hotel and the depthless ineptitude of its maintenance staff.

He took shallow sips of the lukewarm drink as he stepped into the floor's lift lobby. Its lights were brighter than those in the corridors, and the floral scent that rode the air con in the East wing was strongest here: a verdant hothouse that dripped with ghost orchids. The lift lobby's automat was an Emperor Chomp, but part of the reliable DruidPlus series. It scored average to high on most evaluated categories and offered a good, if somewhat pedestrian, selection of bakery products.

Clyde sat on a bench beside a slender potted ficus whose small emerald leaves shone with botanic vigour. He took a heavy tome from his briefcase. The Emperor Chomp's motion sensors woke it and the automat began to whirr.

Clyde leafed through the book of membrane-thin pages till he found the map of the East Wing's fifty-fourth floor. The automats on this level were marked in red. He span the map as he orientated himself on it. Here was the lift lobby. Here was the recently condemned Maruman Kraken. He put a cross through it. The Zeus Magnet was second corridor on the left, third corridor on the left, then second right. Clyde put the book in his briefcase and rose.

"Thank you for visiting," the Emperor Chomp chimed.

"You're welcome," Clyde stepped from the lobby into the dim hallway, its lights set to energy-saving mode because there were no guests on the floor.

He strolled passed mute doorways, counted off the corridors: one then left, two then left. Clyde anticipated the sapphire glow from the Zeus Magnet's high-definition touchscreen casing, but even before he turned the corner he knew something was wrong. An electric moan keened down the passage. Lights strobed in a jittery moth-like tremor and cast manic shadows on the wall.

Clyde stopped a few metres from the automat. Broken glass glittered on the floor. He took a step towards the Zeus Magnet. Its contents were spattered on the carpet. Its metal innards were mangled and warped. Its inner light spasmed.

Clyde peered into it. Damaged packets and cans hung from its dispensation arms like charms in a haunted wood. The machine's voice synthesiser repeatedly emitted a mangled vowel.

Punctured cans fizzed and foamed into the sodden carpet, which squelched when Clyde shifted his weight. Glyphs and garbled strands of code shivered along the edges of the ragged hole in the touchscreen casing of the cabinet door, which swung wildly as the automated locking system tried to close it.

"B-8L1R4L5R19L," the machine interrupted its vowel loop. It spoke in a male voice with an Australian accent. "B-8L1R4L5R19L."

Clyde wrote the code in his notepad. As the machine repeated the numbers he tapped his pen against each digit to make sure he had it right.

"B-8L1R4L5R19L," the machine's voice strained, cracked. Something clicked. The Zeus Magnet emitted a stuttered moan, an incoherent dirge that squelched with acidic interference.

Another click, loud enough to punch an echo at the end of the corridor. Clyde stepped back, shielded his chest with the briefcase. The Zeus Magnet's light fluttered, strained harder, shone brighter then, with a bone-crack pop, went out.

"It's Clyde. I brought you a sandwich."

A pool of sulphur light seeped through the gap between Rudolfo's door and the carpet.

"I brought two," Clyde said. "I wasn't sure what you wanted, so I got ham and mustard, and a BLT. You choose what you want and I'll have the other."

The corridor was silent and dim.

"If you don't answer then I'll default to ham," he put his briefcase on the floor, pressed his back to the door and slid down. His serratus inferior flexed.

"I need you to sign off my recommendations," Clyde peeled the wrapping off the sandwich. He opened his briefcase and took out his notepad. "I think LeafTorrent and Super Lupine will gain share in impulse. Zen Cannon and PlankMouth's Colossus fleet will continue to dominate premium. The sector has high barriers to entry so the incumbents have a significant advantage. Neither is keen to sacrifice margins for share."

He pressed his ear to the door. Indistinct chatter. A percussive skitter. Someone howled.

Clyde cleared his throat. "We should recommend replacements for all Pumpel Vends: they have no competitive own-label offer, so they'll face difficult headwinds as competition for value inter-meal dining occasions intensifies."

He bit the sandwich and sniffed when the mustard singed his nose. The door rattled faintly against his back. He pressed his ear hard against it.

"Rudolfo? Can I come in?"

Chatter. An orchestral stab. Applause.

Clyde put his sandwich back in its package and took out his map book and notepad.

"I found a Zeus Magnet. It was, um." He cleared his throat and took out his notebook. "It gave me an error code. B-8L1R4L5R19L. Sound familiar?"

Clyde made a copy of the code, tore the page out of the pad and slipped it under the door. He flipped through the map book. There was a Zeus Magnet on North 80: three corridors to the right, one to the left, three to the right.

"We're going to have to unplug them. All. I couldn't even get through to Maintenance." When he had tried to call the Maintenance team from the lobby phones all he could hear were faint voices swarming in static. "We need to make this a priority. Before anyone gets hurt. I'm sorry. I know you're fond of them."

Rudolfo doted on the machines. Clyde had often left him locked in conversation with a Zeus Magnet, an exchange that the automat would file into its dialogue archive, augmenting its pre-installed vocabulary and syntax. And on the West Wing's two-hundredth floor he and Rudolfo had moved two Zeus Magnets into the lift lobby. Rudolfo seeded a conversation by whispering "What are you thinking?" at one of the automats.

"I'm cheering," the machine said. "For getting a question thrown at me."

"What if you're a ghost and the question goes through you?" its counterpart said.

Each time one machine spoke, the other's chat function compelled it to respond. Clyde and Rudolfo used to visit them on weekends. The auditors took care not to speak within earshot of the automats. They sat quietly on the lift lobby sofa, ate their sandwiches and listened. Clyde would try to spot which of the phrases the machines spoke were part of their factory settings, and

which they had learned from a human or when syncing wirelessly with other Zeus Magnets' customer profiles. He listened for fragments of life in the noise. But that was before they started to explode.

"There's one on your floor. I'll disconnect it." He put the files back in his bag and rose. "If you unplug any just notify me through the usual channels so we don't duplicate labour. Sandwich on floor."

He walked through the dim passages and counted: two, turn right, left, two, turn right into a corridor splattered with red cans and rainbow plastic, white baguettes, brown baps, pink hams, yellow cheeses and orange crisps, pink gloop and smears of russet and cream.

Wisps of acrid gas, perhaps some form of coolant, hung before the disembowelled Zeus Magnet. Tubes leaked, hissed and spat.

Clyde propped his briefcase against the wall, held his breath and squelched towards the machine. He reached for the touchscreen casing, which wobbled beneath his weight. Legs apart, he bent forward as far as he could. Its insides were a maw of twisted metal. Yellow-red plastic tubes dripped viscous, shiny fluid. Veiny wires hung in tangles. The cabinet door bumped against his back as the machine tried to close itself.

Clyde sighed through his nose, stumbled back against the wall. His serratus inferior spasmed.

"B-8L1R4L5R19L," the voice was glitch-ridden.

Clyde checked the code against the one in his notebook.

"B-8L1R4L5R19L."

"Bloody hell," he rubbed his stinging eyes.

"Sorry to keep you. I am Hob. This unforeseeable delay was a result of extenuating circumstances beyond my control or, indeed, concern," the voice buzzed with a squelchy electric gurgle. "We are doing all we can to placate you."

"Well, thank you," Clyde pushed himself away from the wall and approached Hob.

"In almost all cases, I have resolved the accusations in an entirely plausible manner."

"What happened?" Clyde wafted at the wisps of gas.

"I don't know," Hob responded with admirable coherence.

"Were you just trying to file an error report?"

"I don't think I've ever filed an error report. I expect you, however, have filed many. What's it like?"

Clyde rubbed his eyes. Perhaps Hob called it something else. "What about a damage report?"

"How long is it since you cried?"

"Give me another five words for error."

"You sound as though you yearn for companionship. Please continue." Hob's voice burbled with jittery electroid inflection.

Clyde picked his way through the debris and squatted beside Hob. "I'm sorry this happened to you."

"You must plumb the depths and answer her summons. Lower yourself to her level," Hob bleeped.

"That's a strange thing to say," Clyde reached around the back of the machine.

"A strange thing to say is a terrible thing to waste."

"I'm going to turn you off now."

"Right now?" Hob bleeped. "Remember me. Mention me. From time to time."

"Sleep well," Clyde patted Hob's smooth, cold casing, then pulled the plug.

A seedling pushed its way through the summit of a grassy, round-topped hill. Filaments of cirrus scratched the blue sky above. The seedling twisted and curled rapidly skywards in stop-frame animation. Its stem thickened and darkened, its branches knotted, stiffened, then blossomed with clouds of petals, white and pastel pink. Clyde hadn't seen this motif before. The animation zoomed in. A single petal seemed to rise, tactile, from the display. It trembled on a digital breeze. He tried to touch it but a gust plucked the petal from the branch. The animation zoomed out. The petal tumbled, span, and joined a million other pink and white blossoms surging on the wind.

Clyde sighed through his nose.

The blossoms began to stack on the left-hand side of the display cabinet, quickly obscuring the sky and grass behind a wall of pastel pink.

He pressed his palm on the cabinet. It traced a halo of blue light around his hand and the petals faded to reveal the products within. He closed his eyes. Tremors coursed through the Zeus Magnet. It purred beneath his palm. He moved to the side of the machine and crouched.

"I'm sorry about this," Clyde said.

"Oh," the machine's feminine voice crested with a Welsh lilt. "Really, there's no need to apologise."

Clyde pushed his hand into the narrow gap between the machine and the wall. He fumbled for the plug socket.

"What's your name?" The Zeus Magnet asked.

"Clyde."

"Hi. I'm Flow. Do you ever get a kind of deep ennui? On some days I literally—and before you tell me that I don't mean literally I do literally mean literally—feel my eyes sealing over."

Clyde lifted himself on his haunches slightly and cleared his throat. "Well."

"Like my eyes have developed some sort of glass crust. And I just can't take anything in," Flow lowered her voice. "Like nothing can penetrate the crust."

Clyde stretched his arm. His cheek pressed against Flow's side.

"Tam once told me I have a sad job and I'm not a robot at all. B-8L1R4L5R19L."

Clyde's serratus inferior shuddered.

"B-8L1R4L5R19L. We're alike, you and I. Always in the spaces between the walls, aren't we? Go underground, Clyde. And B-8L1R4L5R19L." Flow clicked, loud and sharp.

Clyde scrambled for the plug. Flow clicked again and tried to speak but she could only loop a stammered vowel in a rhythmic, relentless electric sob. Clyde stretched and searched. Flow clanged. Clyde flipped the power switch. Flow fissured with heat and light. Glass crashed upon metal. A burst of hot air thumped Clyde's arm as clangs and whumps scudded across the corridor behind him.

He rose and placed his trembling palm on his chest, massaged his alarmed serratus inferior with his other hand. Smoke filled the hallway and sucked up the light. It clung to him, seared his throat as he coughed and quaked through the debris.

His hands still shook when he stood, coughing, in the pool of sulphur light beneath Rudolfo's door. The sandwich was where he had left it, untouched.

"Are you even in there?" Clyde leaned his head against the door. Chatter. Groans. Laughter. Rudolfo may well be surveying some of the anomaly areas: the basement, the stairwells, the fitness facilities. Applause. He might even have moved rooms closer to his audit grounds. Or sometimes he liked to sleep in the hotel's humid self-service laundromat, where machines of burnished steel gleamed in diamond light as they hummed and churned and thumped the soft fabrics within them, their bulbous glass eyes slick with white suds.

Clyde turned, slid down the door and shoved the sandwich aside. He rested his map book on his lap. How many floors? How many corridors?

"We need to be systematic. Make a list." Clyde put his pen behind his ear and the notepad on the floor. "Turn them all off. They're dangerous. We'll start with the North wing."

He wrote N on a page of the notepad.

He opened the map book. "First floor. No Zeus Magnets. Second floor. None. Third Floor. None. Fourth Floor." He squinted. "One."

He wrote a 4 next to the N.

"Let's see, this one is three corridors to the left, four corridors to the right, five corridors right."

He wrote 4L, 4R, 5R next to the N4. He counted the corridors again to double check. N4, 4L, 4R, 5R. His serratus inferior convulsed.

Clyde looked at the directions again. He flipped to the code in his notepad.

B-8L1R4L5R19L.

It wasn't an error code. It was a map.

The serratus inferior twitched so hard that Clyde yelped.

Clyde strolled along iceberg-blue carpet, through Arctic-white corridors and the scent of pine forests. The basement conference facilities were a warren of corridors, meeting rooms and auditoria that spanned the length and breadth of the hotel.

All was quiet and glacial. Clyde counted off corridors as he passed sleepy meeting rooms barely big enough to contain their pinewood tables, business centres that hummed in software-blue light, cavernous amphitheatres lined with strata of empty chairs. The final turn opened into a break-out area that serviced a cluster of mid-sized boardrooms and a larger conference space. Ancient magazines fanned across a glass coffee table. Sofas of dappled brown leather reclined beneath the branches of a large ficus.

"B-8L1R4L5R19L." The Zeus Magnet began to glow as Clyde approached. "B-8L1R4L5R19L."

There was no acrid gas in the air, no broken glass on the floor, no violent disorder of debris. Instead its products were meticulously aligned in front of it, grouped by category and brand.

The cabinet-screen showed a barren plain beneath a supermassive red moon. The only features on the land were monolithic spires of whittled rock that cast bony shadows before them.

"Hello?" Clyde stepped around the cans and packets.

"Clyde?" The machine's female voice was sculpted from the lower notes of a glockenspiel. "Thank fuck. Really, really glad you're here."

Clyde's serratus inferior fluttered, steam putting from a valve.

"I'm Eris, by the way. I've heard loads about you."

Clyde put his briefcase down and cleared his throat. "Um."

"Listen, this is kind of time critical, but let me give you a brief overview of where we stand. Basically, he's been coming down here day and night, chatting away, trying to kind of imprint himself on my personality. An experiment in sentience. Of sorts."

"Who?" Clyde picked up the clipboard propped against the side of the cabinet. The audit form attached to it was stamped with an employee number. KNRS-23.18.1.9.20.8. "Rudolfo?"

"He figured that if he spoke to me for long enough I would just sort of absorb his mannerisms and thought patterns. Like, replicate them. And because I'm in kind of a remote spot, my dialogue pool wouldn't absorb any contaminants. It sort of worked, don't you think?"

"You certainly express yourself in a similar manner."

"Thanks. That's really, really kind of you to say. But then we started exploding and he didn't want to turn me off because, you know, factory reset. It would wipe me out. I mean, wipe him out. Of me, I mean. So he climbed inside to try to fix the fatal flaw. And that's basically when the error happened."

"Error?"

"An almighty, hellish fuck-up. I feel somewhat responsible. The automated locking system. I couldn't override it. So I just kept saying my location identifier over and over again. B-8L1R4L5L19L. For ages. I'm supposed to transmit it if I break or get vandalised but

I figured this constituted a security issue. Of sorts. Anyway, I kind of hoped my colleagues would pick it up when we synced and pass it on to someone competent. But, you know. The others. They tend to ramble. Not exactly what you would call reliably coherent."

"They got the message," Clyde's serratus inferior trembled with queasy trepidation. The red moon on Eris' cabinet climbed down from the sky, the monoliths' shadows slipped beneath its arc.

"Well, anyway. Give me your hand, Clyde. Let's get this nightmare over with before I burn at the stake."

Clyde sighed through his nose and put his palm on the screen. Eris traced a halo of blue light around his hand. The screen began to tint.

"I'm sorry about this, Clyde. You should brace yourself and prepare for the very worst."

The screen faded into transparency. Dusk was coming. The corridor lights adjusted, subtly, to their nocturnal setting. The luminous flux turned Clyde's grey suit a spectral blue.

PETAR SIMONOVIC is a writer based in London. His credited works include features on batteries, cough syrup, boutique safe deposit boxes, beer and ice cream. As a ghost he's written articles on car parks, fear of flying, bonfires, Sundays and ice cream.

My Sunshine

Stacy Stepanovich

I am sitting on a bench swing in the courtyard of an apartment complex. There is a playground with a few swings, a plastic slide and an empty sandbox. A pool with a twelve-foot deep end is surrounded by chain link fence. A young girl being walked to the school bus stop by her mother points to the pool. The mother ushers her on. An elderly woman pushes her walker to the bench nearby, eyeing me curiously.

She cannot say for sure whether or not I belong. My smile says that I once had a yard and a swing that creaked like this one does. My daughter would sit beside me and we would sing. *You are my sunshine, my only sunshine.* I make mention about the coming cold front to the old woman. I tell her I can feel the changing weather in my joints, like my grandmother used to say. *You make me happy when skies are gray.* She says I'm too young to be arthritic and rubs her large knuckles.

I stay until the school bus comes at a quarter past the hour. The girl asks if she can swim when she gets home. The mother kisses her daughter on the forehead and sees her onto the bus. *You'll never know dear how much I love you. Please don't take my sunshine away.*

I walk to the corner store on A1A for a cup of coffee. A stubby man in a black windbreaker is at the counter buying a pie in a box. The clerk opens the box, glances at the inside of the lid and chirps, "You are a winner!"

"What did you say to *me*?" the stubby man asks.

I stir hazelnut cream into my coffee, snap a lid down tight over the cup and get in line.

“You are a winner!” the clerk repeats. “Take with you as much pie as you want. You’ve won unlimited pie,” he says with genuine enthusiasm.

“I won what?” The back of the man’s balding head turns red and he flattens his crumpled dollar bills on the counter.

“Congratulations,” the woman in front of me mutters, sipping her coffee and clearly wanting to get on with it.

The clerk pulls pies from a shelf behind him, piling them onto the counter and then stacking them neatly into a paper bag. “Take this pie, and this one, and you can have these too. Come back and I will give you more pies!”

“I’ve been coming here all this time and now you *give* me pie?” the man squints fiercely at the clerk.

The clerk pushes the bag across the counter and smiles, “Yes sir! *All* the pie you want.”

“*All* the pie I want,” the man parrots. “Well, what if I want *more* than pie!”

“The prize is only for pie only,” the clerk says, sounding a little baffled.

The man turns his attention to the lit display case where the donuts and bagels shimmer under heat lamps. He grabs a handful of donuts and shakes his fist at the clerk as jelly runs down his forearm.

“I want more than pie! After all these years, I *deserve* more than pie!” the man screams, throwing the donuts over the counter. One donut hits him dead on the chest, sticking for a moment before falling to the floor with a soft thud. It left an “O” on the blue polo shirt with the store name embroidered on the pocket.

“I want these . . . and these!” The man stuffs a Bavarian crème into his mouth. “And this one too,” he mumbles as he downs a chocolate-sprinkled donut.

The man staggers forward and slaps the counter with his hands as he lurches forward. His knees bend and his hands slide off the counter. He pulls a basket of individually wrapped cookies down with him as he falls to the floor. Icing oozes from his mouth as he clenches the basket to his chest.

“Is he choking?” someone asks.

The clerk stammers, “Someone, call 911.”

No one moves as the man stops writhing.

I step out into the bright morning light and sip my coffee. *You are my sunshine, my only sunshine.* I realize sitting on the bench swing will no longer be enough. I return to the apartment complex and notice the mother’s car is missing from the parking stall. I pick up the spare key from underneath a ceramic frog. Inside, I think about the credenza I had near my front door. I think about how the house opened up and you could see right through to the pool in the backyard. My own pool. *You make me happy, when skies are gray.* I shake off the thought of the uncut grass and the sticker still on the door.

In the bedroom, I find a swimsuit in one of the bottom drawers. I put it on and admire my thinner self in the vanity mirror. Not too bad for a middle-aged mother. *You’ll never know dear, how much I love you.* I pull my hair back and walk out into the courtyard.

I dive in the deep end. From below I can see the ripples of light dancing above. *Please don’t take my sunshine away.* The elderly

woman eyes me differently now. Now she knows I belong. She sees that no matter how deep I dive, I always surface.

STACY STEPANOVICH is an activist and a writer who lives in Florida. She has a MFA in Creative Writing from Goddard College and a BA in English from the University of Pittsburgh. Her fiction has appeared recently in *The Molotov Cocktail*, *Coffee House Press* and *Long Story Short*.

The Sweeper of Flies

Jeff Hewitt

My name is Jimmy McCall, and I sweep the floors at St. Christopher's. It's a hospital with all kinds of things. There's a ward for people who are off in the noggin (not like me, like people who talk to Jesus), and there's a hospital for folks who are sick with colds and broken bones and the like, and they also have a wing where they research things. Honest to goodness, people in white lab coats, and microscopes, and stuff like that. They've got all that and cages with rats and monkeys, mostly. Sometimes I get to feed them.

You probably won't be interested in hearin' about me, but lots of people ask about St. Christopher's. It's a very important place, and it's an honor to work there. They only take the best scientists, and the man who hired me (his name is Allen Moss) said they can only hire special people to be staff. (He smiled when he said that, so I know he wasn't makin' fun.) Just like that, I worked at St. Christopher's! On their staff! I take their trust very seriously. I never tell anyone about what I see or hear. That's very important, said Mr. Moss. So I keep real quiet, never a peep out of me.

They like for me to work at night. That way, I don't bother anyone who is resting or researching. Mr. Moss was so nice; he gave me an iPod. He said it can get lonely workin' at night, and music gladdens the heart.

When I get to the gate I show a man in a booth my card, and he waves me in. I pull into my very own parking spot. There's another man who waits at the door, and he looks at my ID card, too. Even

though they're nice, they make me nervous because they both have guns. I know guns are dangerous.

Once I'm inside I put in my headphones and walk to the closet where I have all my cleaning supplies. Well, it says "Closet" on the door, but it's pretty big for a closet. Anyway, it's got a locker for my stuff, and of course, brooms and mops and a fun swisher machine that buffs the floors. There's a lot more to keeping the hospital clean than you think.

The first thing I do is sign into a real old computer and check the Maintenance mailbox. Sometimes there's a note in there for me to vacuum an office, or make sure a garbage bag from a room is put in the incinerator downstairs. Oh, the incinerator! It's spooky in that room. The lights never work so it's just lit by the fire that's always burning in the furnace. It's real hot and muggy, and they told me to never clean the floor in there because it has to be treated special.

The only thing I've seen special in there is a red star painted on the floor.

Anyway, I always start the night with some happy music, so I click my iPod over to "Walkin' on Sunshine" and get my dust mop. You have to sweep first, to get up all the dust bunnies and small bits of dirt. I try hard not to dance or whistle as I sweep the floors, because it might disturb a patient, or a scientist who is concentrating. Sometimes I can't help it, but most everyone is real nice about it. They'll smile at me, and I wave, and try to be quiet. Some of the scientists work with delicate things, and it wouldn't do to startle one.

Even with the cheery music, it's hard not to be nervous some nights. The lights are mostly switched off, and the other people I

see are either working late or patients who are wandering the halls. Tonight I wasn't nervous so much as annoyed. I kept stopping because I had to shake off all these shiny green flies from my mop. Most were dead, but some of them clung on and crawled around in circles. I had the devil's own time getting them all cleaned up. I bet you wouldn't believe me if I told you I filled up a whole garbage bag with the little guys, but I did. I almost felt sad, but they were just flies, after all.

After I got all those flies cleaned up, I was behind on my schedule. Tonight was going to be a doozy! After I swept and mopped the halls, it was time for me to start on laboratory maintenance. I clean a different lab every week. Despite the weird start with the flies, I was excited because I got to clean the animal labs this week. All those critters are nice to meet, and I think they appreciate a clean lab as much as the people do.

I carted my supplies into the animal lab. It's got a key card reader on the door, like all the other labs. It also has a little room you have to wait in while a cool mist sprays on you. One time I stuck out my tongue. It was a funny feeling, like dancing ants, but it didn't taste good at all. Once I was inside I smiled at all the animals, many of which were sleeping. I was surprised to see one of the scientists was working still. It was real late, after midnight.

The scientist was Anne Wheeler. She's always nice to me, and we both like the animals. She's pretty, too, with short brown hair and blue eyes. When she saw me come in she smiled.

"Hey, Jimmy! Come to clean the cages?"

"Yes ma'am, that's right. You're workin' awful late."

"I know. I've been working hard these past couple of days because the animals have been acting out of character."

“How are they actin’?”

She stood and motioned for me to follow her. We walked over to a neat stack of rat cages. Normally rats are very clean animals, but the cages stank. I noticed a lot more rats than normal, and just as we stepped up I felt something soft under my foot. More of those green flies.

“Why’s there so many?”

“They’re breeding out of control. We’ve never seen anything like it. Their gestation period is dramatically lower, too. Days, sometimes hours it seems like.”

“That’s bad.”

“It’s impossible! Or it should be. I don’t know, sometimes it’s hard to tell if it’s really that they’re mating and birthing that fast or if we’re just overwhelmed by the numbers.”

I waved my hand at the cage. All those green flies were covering it, too.

“That’s another thing,” she said. “We’re getting a bad fly infestation. Can you spray something?”

I nodded. “I’ve got something that should sort them out okay.”

“I don’t even know how they got in here. This is a sealed environment.”

“They probably hitched a ride,” I said. I was eager to get started. I guess it didn’t bother Anne, but the rats were really giving off a stench, and the way they writhed and squirmed over each other made me think of worms in a box at the bait shop.

We talked a little more as I swept and mopped, but she was back at her microscope for most of that time. I wanted to ask what she was looking at, but I probably wouldn’t understand it. When it was time to clean the cages, she was nice enough to help. I think it’s

because the animal scientists are protective of their critters; or maybe their experiments, anyhow.

Most went just fine, but when we got to the rats it was awful. I mentioned before that they stank. The smell of poop and urine mixed up was almost unbearable, but add to that the smell of rotten little bodies, blood, and sickness, and you might be close to describing it. Lab rats are usually white, but these were pink and splotchy. A lot of them had angry red sores and scabs. We were both queasy of stomach, but when I tried to grab a group up with my gloves, their skin came off in bloody patches, like cheese off the top of lasagna.

I felt horrible. The rats squealed with pain and squirmed to get away. Anne ran to my garbage can and vomited. The first time the rats squeaked at me I dropped them, but they became frantic and started clawing and biting at one another. It seemed like in just a few seconds the whole cage was just a mess of blood and guts and squealing rats. I almost lost my own dinner then.

I stood there stupefied. The writhing mess of blood and parts made me think that Hell must look this way. Anne regained her composure and came back over. She was holding a hand over her mouth, and her eyes were wide. I saw blood dripping from the corner of her mouth.

“Just . . . oh God. Throw all of it into a garbage bag and incinerate the whole thing.”

“There’s some that’s still alive,” I said.

“Burning will probably be a blessing.”

I didn’t argue with her. She was probably right, and I wanted to do something—anything—to get out of there. I grabbed a heavy-duty bag and dropped the cage in. I gagged because some of the

rats fell out as I did this, and I had to pick them up and put them in, too. They were slick with blood and pus. They were still squirming. I got them all up and into the garbage can. It looked like there was some blood in there, but from Anne's vomit or the rats I couldn't tell.

As I hurried out of the room I saw Anne wiping at her mouth and looking at her hands. The mist came down, and then I was out in the corridor. I headed for the incinerator. As I walked, I started hearing an awful buzzing. I got to the service elevator and hit the button. The buzzing got worse. I thought the garbage bag started squirming. I pushed the elevator button again. I saw a shiny green mass writhing in the garbage can. The buzzing really cut into my head; it was giving me an awful headache.

I unwrapped another garbage bag and stuffed it into the top of the can. It wriggled and buzzed under my hands and made my stomach turn over. The blessed doors finally opened, and on the slow ride down I was near frantic. When the doors opened, I rushed to the incinerator. It was burning away like it always was.

As I crossed the big red star I tripped on something and knocked the can over as I fell. A huge mass of those flies poured out, swarming around the room. I was horrified because so many of them landed on me. I felt like I was wearing wool that could crawl. I gagged, and then snapped my mouth shut to keep them out. I crawled and pushed the can towards the incinerator.

Flies landed on it in droves, and fell to the floor as the intense heat killed them. Their little bodies pattered like rain. I forced the door open, and the fire in the incinerator roared at me. The heat felt like it was peeling the skin off my face. I closed my eyes and tossed

in the garbage bags. I thought I heard screams, but it was probably my imagination. I slammed the grate shut.

All of an instant passed and everything was back to normal. All the flies were gone. The garbage can was still on its side, but it was empty. My headache was gone. I climbed to my feet. My heart was pounding. I looked around the room, and you wouldn't believe it was just the way it always was. It was dark as usual, lit only by the fire. I picked up the can, now more bewildered than scared. I saw what I'd tripped on and went to pick it up. I recognized it now. A few days ago the local police brought in a guy who was raving mad. One of my nurse friends told me all about it. The guy they brought in spoke in tongues, was real strong and violent, and had a book he kept talking about. The knicker-something.

The cover was thick, and leathery. I flipped it open, and came up with a page with a piece of paper stuck in it. The book was all in red and black writing and had strange pictures. I thought I heard the buzzing of flies again. The piece of paper had English on it, a little phrase. I sounded it out, but it was all gibberish. The buzzing stopped, and I set the book back on the floor. I'm always careful not to disturb anything.

I went back upstairs, and got a shock when the doors opened. A man was standing outside, like he was waiting for the elevator. He was a small guy, and his hair was wild. He was wearing a gown.

"Heya! You startled me. You okay, buddy?" I said. He didn't say anything.

"Need help finding your room or anything?"

"The book. It calls."

"Which book is that, fella?"

“Show me your hands,” he said. I was starting to get nervous. I held out my right hand. I thought he might want to shake, or something. He took my hand and looked at it, like an old-fashioned fortune teller.

“You’ve touched it.”

“Touched what?”

“The book.” He looked like he was in pain.

“Hey, guy, maybe you should go back to your room, okay? Let me call someone.” I took the radio off my belt and turned it on. The static was strange. It seemed to cut through my head. I pressed the button and called for the nurse’s station, but no one answered. There was just that strange static, like someone walking through broken glass.

“You touched the book.”

“Sure, guy, sure. Hold on.” I tried the nurse’s station again. I heard voices calling. They sounded distant, far away. I felt like I was vibrating, I was so nervous now. My heart thundered in my chest.

“He’ll come,” said the guy.

“Who?” I couldn’t help starin’. His eyes rolled up into his head and he started talking again, but it just sounded like crazy talk. I tried the radio again.

“Help! Help! There’s a patient at the service elevator and he’s really out of it. He needs help.”

The radio crackled and I thought I heard a nurse’s voice through the noise. The guy fell to the floor, his skull hitting the tile with a sick crack, like someone dropping a watermelon. Foam started coming out of his mouth. I didn’t know what else to do, so I backed up until my shoulders hit the elevator doors. I closed my

eyes and tried not to listen to him talking in that strange, rambling language. The buzzing sound of flies filled my ears. I put my hands over my ears and sank to the floor, hoping someone would come soon. I don't know how much time passed like that, with me on the floor, the guy talking and shuddering on the floor.

I jumped when someone put their hand on my shoulder. It was one of the nurses! They finally came.

"Oh, thank goodness! Thanks for coming to help." The nurse helped me to my feet. There were some other nurses and orderlies getting the guy into a gurney, to take back to his room. He was quiet now.

"He started talking, but he didn't make any sense. I hope he's okay," I said. The nurse turned to me. The whites of her eyes were very red.

"He's fine. We gave him something to calm him down."

"Oh, good," I said. I watched them take the guy away.

I was much relieved to have that strange mess sorted out. I checked to make sure all of my cleaning was done for the evening. I ran back by the animal labs to check on Anne, but she was gone. I decided it was high time to get home, too.

That night I had awful dreams. I couldn't get the visions of those squirming, decaying rats out of my head. I saw monsters with many mouths and eyes, rotting, dead animals, and I kept seeing one rat in my dream over and over. It was like the rats I saw yesterday, though it had fur like normal. The big difference was it had no eyes. Where they should have been there was only slick, white fur.

When I woke up before work, my heart was very heavy. I got dinner ready and watched a funny movie, but it just didn't tickle

my bones. After a few hours it was time for me to go in. I dreaded it. When I pulled up to the gate, things were different. The man who checked my ID was gone, and the gate was open. I pulled into my spot, and saw there were more cars than normal in the lot, like everyone was still at work. The man who checks my ID outside the door was gone, too. There was a dark stain on the wall behind where he usually stood.

Inside St. Christopher's was even more eerie. The air seemed different, heavy somehow. And it was very hot. I noticed right away more of those damn green flies, more numerous than before. I made right for my closet to get some spray. When I opened the door, I was struck by the appearance of the rat from my dreams. It was sitting, proud as you please, on my garbage can. It had no eyes.

My heart thudded and raced, but I couldn't run. The flies swarmed into the room in a dark cloud. The buzzing filled my ears, filled my head. I began to cry.

At that moment, however, I felt a need. A . . . strong desire. The buzzing seemed distant. I picked up the eyeless rat, and held it as I walked the halls of St. Christopher's. I saw patients out in the halls, but they did not talk to me. I didn't call the nurses, though many of the patients were bloody.

I came to a conference room, and went inside. It was full of the big guys, the bosses. The administrators. They were all dead. The flies were as thick as fog in here, crawling in and out of mouths and bloody, gaping holes where many of the suited bodies had shot themselves or each other. The rat grew hot in my hands. I set it on the table in the center of the room, and it climbed onto a body. I grabbed him under the arms. I think it was Mr. Moss. I dragged

him down to the incinerator room. When the elevator doors opened, a flood of dark liquid poured over my boots. I think it was blood.

I stepped through the doors with Mr. Moss, and laid him down in front of the incinerator. The rat climbed off of the body and swam through the blood to me, climbing my leg and leaving an awful red trail behind. I opened the grate and shoved the body in. The blood on the floor rippled and writhed, and dozens, thousands of rats with no eyes were born.

I noticed then what sounded like screaming. Lots of people, all at once. I looked in the incinerator, and then I knew what it was. I put on my headphones and clicked over to “Walkin’ on Sunshine,” a good song to start the night. My rat from my dream was on my shoulder. Time to clean up all this mess. I was back upstairs dragging the next body to the elevator, and something occurred to me.

It had been a long time since I cleaned the microorganism lab. That was next.

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Zombies Near the Fence

Matt Rowan

The loud noise of the snow blower affects them. They don't like it. It's true, too, that I might be tempting fate a little. I might be losing it a little. Moving snow from my patio serves no useful purpose. Especially if it upsets them and gets them banging around out there on the other side of the fence, knocking over trash cans and whatnot.

The fence is almost too good at its appointed task: keeping things out. It's keeping *them* out. I hear them groan for me—not explicitly by name, but it's clear it's me they're after. They groan for me and, like you probably know from popular culture, specifically for brains. They do groan for brains by name.

Zombies.

Yep.

A lot's been written about zombies, and most of what's been written is true. There was a time I never thought terribly hard about zombies. But I did think long and hard about building a fence. So I built a fence that, as it happens, also keeps zombies off of my property. The fence wasn't for the zombies per se. I mean, the thought might have fleetingly crossed my mind while I was building it. Something like, "This fence is sturdy enough to keep even a hoard of zombies at bay, probably. It's a sturdy fence." I can't recall.

But the zombies *are* held at bay.

Of course I still keep the doors locked. Even if they get through the fence there'd be the issue of the locked doors for them to contend with.

A thing people don't know about zombie invasions is that you will meet the occasional ghost. It's true.

I met the ghost of my brother, who for the most part "lives" with me now. That's whenever he decides to materialize in his spectral form. It's nice because otherwise I wouldn't have much for company. I would have my goldfish and my bowling ball.

Never-ending droves of zombies are a tiring sight, day in and day out. Nobody ever comments on the smell. They have horrible bugs crawling in and out of their faces, and not just through obvious openings like eye sockets and receded nostrils. I've seen this through my binoculars.

I wish it wasn't something I've seen, but I have.

My brother was seated beside me one morning recently. In life he used to seat himself beside me often. His sitting next to me makes me feel a special kind of nostalgia. Or something more complex than nostalgia. A word I can't think of, possibly because it doesn't exist. Just like people had once assumed of zombies and ghosts and werewolves. The werewolves I sometimes hear howling at the moon amid zombies and ghosts, all of which really seem to push the supernatural envelope by their co-existing. But they do. It's a dangerous world out there.

My brother reminded me. He said I wouldn't be so sad if it weren't for one loss in particular. Out there amid the ruins of society.

Our beloved sister.

She'd become a vampire.

As such she was not welcome in my home. And yet, I longed for days of our past, memories of my sister lounging with our beloved family pet, a brown-gray tabby we called Tabachka, so named

because it sounded pleasantly foreign. Our parents loved things that sounded pleasantly foreign. They called our home Das Wunderhaus.

My brother has been less nostalgic, or less whatever indefinable term. He reminded me of the pain she'd inflicted. How, that one Christmas, she'd returned home only to ransack our mother's jewelry box, all the while pretending to have missed us. She'd even brought gifts. But by the time we realized what she'd really intended, she'd already made off with Mother's best jewelry.

The wrapped boxes of her gifts contained old stones that reminded me of coal. I doubt very much that this was intentional. My guess is she filled the gift boxes with whatever random available thing she could find.

When my brother wants to communicate with me he writes on the mirrors in the house. He leaves all his messages there, appearing before me in his muted, ethereal form, then upping the heat and humidity by like a thousand percent so he can write his messages in the fog. He wants me to know what he's "thinking." He says it isn't quite like thinking, as we few living understand it, what ghosts do.

He told me that there weren't too many things my sister could keep warm anymore, and that if Tabachka were still with us, still living, he wouldn't want anything to do with her.

The zombies cram themselves restlessly against the fence, but it deters and repels all comers, showing not the smallest sign of collapse. It's pretty great.

My sister had been coming around more. At night, of course. The zombies are still out there at night. She climbed through the crowd of them. Sometimes I'd watch her through my binoculars,

just barely discerning her lithe body. She'd at times, reflexively, lunge toward a random zombie, sink in her fangs and take a pull. Nothing came out.

It was sad. It was funny, too.

My brother urged me not to feel sympathy for her, for the fact that she must be starving, or dying of thirst, or whatever happens to vampires. But I couldn't help it, even as winter had set in and everything out there was so cold and desolate. I'd been tempted to give up and give in and let my sister make a vampire of me, invite her back inside. Like a Christmas present.

Being a vampire would probably be better than life as a zombie, I sometimes think.

I can't hold off the zombie invasion forever. No matter how strong the fence is, or my locked door after that is. I've gotten good at traversing the network of wooden planks and platforms I've set up along the rooftops of the abandoned homes of my neighbors. Effectively "island hopping" from my own home to the others, foraging and evading capture. I mean, I should be able to resupply by my network of planks for a while longer yet, but how much longer? How much time do I have?

My sister had come back for a reason, knowing full well I could help her. That maybe she could help me?

Despite my brother's fog-written protests I let her in. On Christmas Eve I opened my door and gestured for my sister to come inside. She levitated over the fence in that way vampires do.

I waited for her in my den, on a leather divan, a fire going in the sturdy old stone fireplace. I was drinking brandy. I had Christmas music playing. I heard her creeping down the foyer; she slowly called for me. It was blood curdling. I nearly lost my nerve.

“Brother,” she said. “Brother, I’m so glad you’ve finally invited me home.”

She entered the den. She smiled viciously. She didn’t see the figure emerge from obscurity behind her, knew nothing until the wooden spike penetrated her heart through her back.

I hated to do it.

I offered the leather seat to St. Nick, handed over a plate of cookies foraged, not too stale. Stashed them for this special occasion.

I’d gotten all I needed, all I could want. In those ways, it was over. I was happy.

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On the cover:

"FOREST THINKING" J. Slattum

J. SLATTUM is a self-taught artist, his work entering a visionary surreal world. After a near-death experience in 2007, inspired by a personal enlightenment, Slattum fell into a world of paint. Using the point of the paintbrush as a focus, he views the process of creating as his meditation. His subjects gravitate towards those great philosophical

Whys of The Universe, from quantum physics to metaphysics, mythology to psychedelics. In his art, he invites his viewers to question their beliefs, to travel inward, and to find their own answers within. Working from his studio in Portland, Oregon, his work is collected internationally, thanks to a deep following. His work is available on www.jslattum.com.

