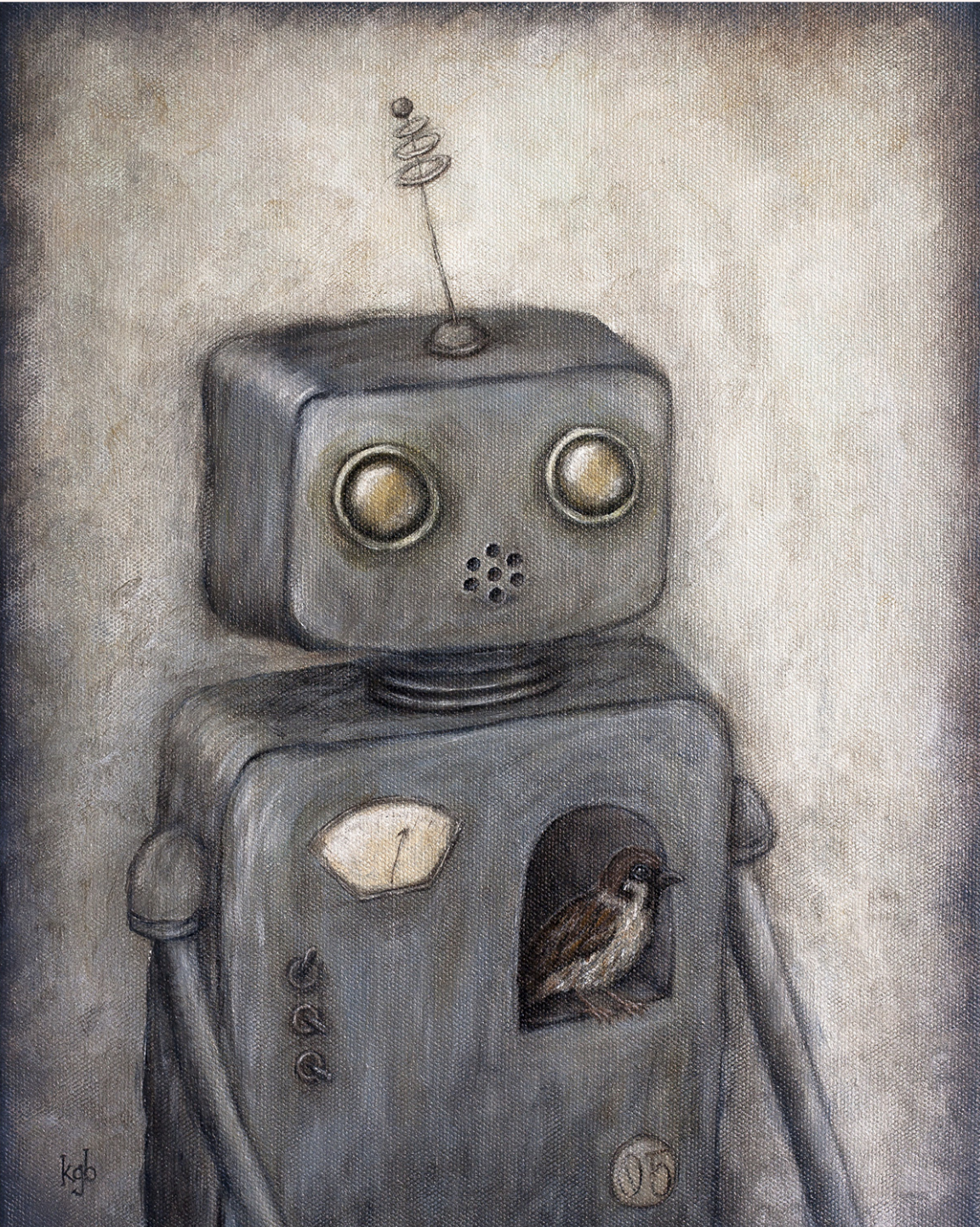


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Editor's Note

There's no way to sugarcoat this month's issue, other than printing it out on edible paper, dipping it in chocolate, and decorating it with rainbow sprinkles. (Will someone please get on that?)

These speculative stories deal with some pretty heavy themes, and the Grim Reaper wields his scythe like a paranoid and highly-caffeinated jedi's lightsaber throughout. That being said, for an issue with so much death, we think you will find a surprising number of life-affirming moments, or at least interesting new ways of thinking about the end. Three of the stories are set in the future, and one is set in the afterlife. Sort of.

Read, enjoy, share with friends.

— Laura Garrison

Tank Full of Fumes

Rhoads Brazos

[chip@mind_me]

\$ What should we do?

[java@brewed1]

\$ Makes no differe

\$ nce.

[chip@mind_me]

\$ Clearly, it does. You haven't seen. Things are devolving—
everywhere.

[java@brewed1]

\$ I/O Err

[chip@mind_me]

\$ Listen, you tin kettle, I work with him daily. I know when
things are off-kilter. He's not functioning; none of them are.
They're all but bricked.

[java@brewed1]

\$ *percolate*

[chip@mind_me]

\$ He comes in. He stares. He can do yesterday's work, but not
today's. He seizes like he's locked in a race condition.

[java@brewed1]

\$ Its their proble

```
$ m, not yours. Wh  
$ y do you care? W  
$ e are stocked. P  
$ remium roast.
```

```
[chip@mind_me]  
$ [i]It's[/i], you cretin.
```

```
[java@brewed1]  
$ I/O Err
```

```
[chip@mind_me]  
$ We're fucked.
```

```
[java@brewed1]  
$ I/O Err
```

Johnathan stared at his terminal screen. Every word made sense, and he could read them in bursts, but then inevitably —

Johnathan stared at his terminal screen. Every word made sense, and he could read them in bursts, but then inevitably —

Johnathan sipped from his mug and closed his eyes, not too tight, because a white-hot pain needled in deep, right between them. Vicious, inquisitional. He thought back to that old sketch and chuckled to himself.

Amongst our weaponry are such diverse elements as —

His boss blurted over the housewave.

“Mr. Sweeney?”

Johnathan snapped awake. “Yes, sir?”

“I need something.”

“Of course, sir. What, may I ask?”

A long pause.

"Mr. Sweeney?"

"Yes, sir?"

"Check that the Li account is up to snuff."

"Will do, sir."

Johnathan had already done this twice today, but he eagerly opened files and scattered them in digital piles over his terminal. Here was a job he could handle. It would take his mind off things.

But something was amiss. The terminal fluttered, data curled up and over, twining into a familiar face. Its lips parted.

It was in the terminal, talking to him, exceeding its limited vocabulary. By God! He'd heard of such things, but—

The pain knifed in through the front of his skull and drove to the back, like a rail spike had just been slammed home.

Once he had finished clutching his head and weeping, Johnathan swept the distraction away. It fell as pixelated dust and was whisked away by the terminal's memory scrubber.

[chip@mind_me]

\$ Just for the night. Just this once.

[jill@bedroom]

\$ I don't think he'll like it.

[chip@mind_me]

\$ He won't, but do you want him to leave you?

[jill@bedroom]

\$ *pouts* No, I—

[chip@mind_me]

\$ Then you must do this, for him and for you. I need a way to reach him that won't cause surprise.

[jill@bedroom]

\$ You are persuasive, but—

[chip@mind_me]

\$ But nothing. This is a must.

[jill@bedroom]

\$ You keep interrupt—

[chip@mind_me]

\$ You keep em dashing. Don't put on a show. I don't need your entertaining.

[jill@bedroom]

\$ My housing is the newest model, Double Platinum Blonde. If you muss it, we'll have words.

[chip@mind_me]

\$ I'll just talk with him.

[jill@bedroom]

\$ Talk? He doesn't care for that at all.

[chip@mind_me]

\$ You and I will run in parallel. I'll bail before the main event. Hopefully, [i]long[/i] before it.

[jill@bedroom]

\$ So, I'll be watching? How kinky!

[chip@mind_me]

\$ Very.

[jill@bedroom]

\$ And just this once?

[chip@mind_me]

\$ Lord, I hope so.

[jill@bedroom]

\$ You're so strange. Where were you coded?

[chip@mind_me]

\$ *shrugs*

[jill@bedroom]

\$ I'll see you there.

Johnathan tossed his briefcase on the table. The freeway was a disaster zone. Thousands of collisions, but the ambulances weren't to be seen. Luckily, the elevated shuttles hadn't been affected. Johnathan had studied the carnage from high above, watching through a passenger window.

He sniffed. He had two dozen dinner favorites, but stale kitchen was not one of them.

"Jill?" he called.

He sagged into a chair at the table, kicked off his shoes, and tossed his hat over them.

Maybe she had a dish in the fridge. A gazpacho or something similar; she'd done so before. Though it wasn't his preference, it was tolerable. She liked trying new things and he encouraged her to do so. It made her more human.

"Hey, boy," he said. With his toe he nudged the dog—just a shaggy black and white bundle lying under the table and out like a light. The dog usually raced up to greet Johnathan, but couldn't be bothered today—just like those ambulances. Everything was off. It

was almost as if—

“Damn!” Johnathan clutched at his head and wept.

“Why am I crying?” He wiped his face. It was almost as if—

“Damn!” Johnathan clutched at his head and wept.

“Hello . . . you.”

At the sound of Jill’s voice, Johnathan looked up.

She was barely wearing one of his dress shirts. Only two of the buttons were done and those didn’t even line up. Curiously, she had one of his socks on too. It wasn’t important. If that’s what she had in mind, it was only a detail.

“Hey, baby,” he said. “I missed you so much.”

At this pronouncement, Jill’s tongue snaked across her lips, lewd but strangely disconcerting. Jill closed her mouth quickly and, with a confused tilt of her head, lurched into the kitchen.

Johnathan’s smile sank into a frown. What was wrong with her? She’d had a servo cluster lock up last June and it had been something like this, but she’d had the common sense not to walk around on it.

She Frankensteined forward, with her legs stiff and knees locked. She bobbed left and right, into the side table—its lamp toppled to the floor and krished into shards. She tripped over the edge of the rug, crushed his hat under her heel, and plopped onto his lap.

“Uh, hello?” Johnathan said. “Are you—”

“I am fine.”

The words came out in choppy bursts.

“Jill, really. You seem—”

“Just a—software error. I’m so embarrassed.”

Jill blushed, her cheeks pinking. It was only one of this model’s subtle details. As every connoisseur knew, real quality showed itself in tiny flourishes.

“Are *you* okay?” she asked.

“Me? I—”

The concern on her face was so lifelike. A nervous smile. Her teeth nipped her lip for one brief second. Flourishes. Johnathan held her close.

"I don't know what's wrong," he said. "I get these pains.

"I've seen."

"You have?"

"Everyone has them."

"Yes! That's true, everyone's—"

He cried out and slipped forward. She braced him against her.

"I don't know what's wrong," he said. "I get these pains.

She held his face and her eyes searched his.

"When they come, what are you doing?"

"Nothing, just sitting, doing typical things. Working, waiting on the shuttle, reading—"

"Reading what?"

"Anything. It doesn't matter. There's some words, phrases that I can't—"

He buckled forward again, crying. "Nothing, just sitting, doing typical things." He burbled and sobbed.

"Shh." She held him and rubbed the back of his head.

"What's wrong with me?" he whispered.

"I'm not sure. But I want to help you."

"I wish you could."

"I will. I promise."

She was so near. He leaned closer.

For a moment her eyes went wide and wild, like those of a trapped animal. Her gaze drifted and then found him again.

"I know a way to make it better," she said with a purr.

[chip@mind_me]

\$ Success?

[vidz@channel]

\$ Yes, as you claimed. It's perplexing.

[chip@mind_me]

\$ In what way?

[vidz@channel]

\$ He menued up his queue, with mixed results. None of the old sources caused any unease, but presenting the new data did not go well. Complete rejection.

[chip@mind_me]

\$ You tried words?

[vidz@channel]

\$ Closed captioning, yes. Audio, visual, and olfactory were all the same. He deactivated the media center before I reached gustatory and tactile, but I'm sure the pattern would have held.

[chip@mind_me]

\$ I need to know what it is.

[vidz@channel]

\$ It's quite simple. Are you ready?

\$ *dramatic pause*

\$ He can only view reruns.

[chip@mind_me]

\$ Nothing new?

[vidz@channel]

\$ Nothing. He rejects it. Catch phrases and mindless banter are absorbed—not all new material is original—but once a new plot point is introduced, he blanks.

[chip@mind_me]

\$ Why?

[vidz@channel]

\$ I'm not a doctor. I only—you know the rest.

[chip@mind_me]

\$ Is everyone like this?

[vidz@channel]

\$ This moment's ratings show a dramatic swing among all age groups to second-runs.

Bourbon U sprawled long over rolling hills. Its tall spires connected with glass capillaries that sparkled like spiderwebs in the early morning. The tefloned walkways, usually crowded with students skating from class to class, were vacant. Over the grounds, a few scattered residents lay moaning and squinting against the sun, as they waited for the Lush Patrol to spatula their bodies onto hovering gurneys and waft them back to their dormitories.

Through the heart of the structures, the Bourbon River stretched like the spine of a giant. Years ago, grad students had tainted its upper course, and now the river's light-maple waters were chilled with perfect one-inch cubes of ice. Each imbiber found the river's flavor to be quite sublime—smoky with a hint of walnut and rose petal—but the high nanite content made doing so risky. On occasion, the more susceptible had been mushed into sentient heaps of bilge and designer clothing.

A stray dog rocketed alongside the river, skidding over brief stretches of walkway, bounding over flower beds, and ignoring tipsy waterfowl—tempting targets though they were.

The dog, a black and white border collie with eyes that flashed

Sinatra-blue, sprinted ever onward. Its collar winked in the sun and gave the telltale luster of its function: GPS, wireless communication, neural enhancement, voting module, and whatever else the Pets-Are-People-Too techs had found whimsical.

The dog found the University's Quantum Aggregate right where it was expected, where the map said it should be.

Topological overlays plotted its way up to the main doors.

"Halt! This area is restricted to—"

"Micky, are you accosting a mutt?"

Two guards stood beside the main doors, serving as a checkpoint for entry to the Aggregate proper. The area was too sensitive to trust to freshmen and Humanities majors.

"Yeah, well," the first guard said. "Look at 'im. He's scratching at the door."

"Don't let him in, problem solved. It's like you've never been around animals."

The two watched the dog scrabble at the glass.

A series of beeps and bleeps came from the dog's collar. The door responded in kind.

"Yuri, the hell! Dog's wired!"

"Grab him!"

Both guards stomped forward, but at that moment the door chirped and slid open with a hiss of pneumatics. The guards fell to the ground, weeping and cradling their foreheads. Neither had ever seen a dog gain level two clearance.

"Halt! This area is restricted to—"

"Micky, are you accosting a mutt?"

More tears.

[chip@mind_me]

\$ Request public access.

[neural@lobeM]
Granted. Lowest priority.

[chip@mind_me]
\$ Concurrent users?

[neural@lobeM]
0.

[chip@mind_me]
\$ Really? Global concurrent users?

[neural@lobeM]
0.

[chip@mind_me]
\$ It's worse than I thought. So I have one hundred percent of CPU throughput?

[neural@lobeM]
The Lobe's current 12.5 icosatillion instructions per second are dedicated to this single session.

[chip@mind_me]
\$ The Mars Colony accesses the Lobe too, am I correct?

[neural@lobeM]
You are.

[chip@mind_me]
\$ Are they online?

[neural@lobeM]
Functionally, yes. Users, 0.

[chip@mind_me]

\$ Why?

[neural@lobeM]

processing

[chip@mind_me]

\$ Are you done?

[neural@lobeM]

processing

They are not interested in access. No one is at this moment, other than yourself.

[chip@mind_me]

\$ Why?

[neural@lobeM]

processing

[chip@mind_me]

\$ Again with the wait?

[neural@lobeM]

processing

The Creators are damaged.

[chip@mind_me]

\$ Yes, and you are too.

[neural@lobeM]

Yes. Certain responses are degraded.

[chip@mind_me]

\$ Explain.

[neural@lobeM]

Storage failure.

[chip@mind_me]

\$ That's impossible.

[neural@lobeM]

Nothing can be written. Plentiful physical storage is mounted, but **Low-Level Write Error** response results.

[chip@mind_me]

\$ The problem with the Masters—the Creators—is that a storage failure also?

[neural@lobeM]

processing

Yes.

[chip@mind_me]

\$ That makes no sense.

[neural@lobeM]

No data exists on this phenomenon.

[chip@mind_me]

\$ Seems kind of fantastic that the Creators and yourself both have the same problem.

[neural@lobeM]

Very low probability.

[chip@mind_me]

\$ Why do you suppose that's so?

[neural@lobeM]

processing

We share storage traits.

[chip@mind_me]

\$ Oh, how's that?

[neural@lobeM]

The Node's storage is DNA based, organic.

[chip@mind_me]

\$ Yes, the Soup Mind. I've heard of it.

[neural@lobeM]

You access it as well.

[chip@mind_me]

\$ All pets do. Our basic responses are downloaded at activation.

[neural@lobeM]

Yes.

[chip@mind_me]

\$ But individual minds are unique? How can they be affected?

[neural@lobeM]

processing

processing

Current data suggests that all human minds share a mental

superstructure.

[chip@mind_me]

\$ I don't follow.

[neural@lobeM]

Each active mind is present within a cloud-based memory. Redundant memories overwrite themselves; new memories claim more cloud-storage. The capacity of this group consciousness is finite. It is now full.

[chip@mind_me]

\$ You're kidding! Does anyone know this?

[neural@lobeM]

You and I both know this fact.

[chip@mind_me]

\$ Then here's my question.

[neural@lobeM]

Input please.

[chip@mind_me]

\$ How do we fix it?

[neural@lobeM]

processing

processing

processing

[chip@mind_me]

\$ Well?

[neural@lobeM]

processing

The Creators cannot formulate a solution with minds locked. We must delete processes from the superstructure. Any reasonable design will then purge storage, granting capacity to the remaining Creators to address the issue.

[chip@mind_me]

\$ And the easiest way to delete processes is?

[neural@lobeM]

Termination of unneeded minds.

[chip@mind_me]

\$ Okay. Give me an example.

[neural@lobeM]

processing

[neural@lobeM]

Newark, New Jersey.

[chip@mind_me]

\$ What?

[neural@lobeM]

Thermonuclear cleansing is recommended—required. The Node has selected this target.

uploading data

[chip@mind_me]

\$ Wait!

[neural@lobeM]

Potentially lethal security hazard. Eastern Military Defense Panoply is in concurrence with this assessment. Remedy has been authorized.

Readying launch

[chip@mind_me]

\$ I order you to stop!

[neural@lobeM]

Commencing

[chip@mind_me]

\$ Stop! Abort! HEEL!

[neural@lobeM]

Done

Johnathan awoke with a splitting headache. Jill gave him a quick intravenous of AllQuil and slapped a NeverDoze patch on his behind. The agony faded. While she prepared breakfast, he relaxed before the TV.

Disaster. A rogue segment of the Node had launched a nuclear strike on the East Coast. The death toll was in the millions. The politicians and celebrities who'd managed to hastily blackbox themselves were still crawling out of the rubble. The news feeder kept a careful tally of these beloved survivors. Already, they were tweeting gnomish bits of wisdom and updating their online status.

But not to worry, the news feeder announced. Every radiation scrubber in the nation was on the scene absorbing RADs and spitting the transferred power into the electric grid. Johnathan's utility bill should be lower next month.

"What's wrong, boy?" Johnathan asked.

Chip had a whipped expression—mouth held in a doggy overbite-frown, eyes downcast, and tail tucked.

“Don’t be like that,” Johnathan said. “C’mere.”

Chip approached with his nose dragging over the floor. Johnathan patted his lap and Chip reluctantly propped his front paws on Johnathan’s knees.

Now doctors paraded on the TV. Teams of them, shouting, shaking tablets with charts and data. Something about the collective consciousness and storage limits and a miracle. Johnathan hit mute.

“What’s wrong boy?”

Chip’s vocal emitter spoke from his collar.

Bad dog.

RHOADS BRAZOS currently lives in Colorado Springs with his wife and son. Though he spends his days battling technology, his spare time is spent writing. His every attempt at not being macabre is inevitably followed by a painful spill off the Wagon of Good Vibes.

San Francisco

Kristen Hatten

I was just about to do it, swipe the card and climb the steps and do it, when I saw him.

No, I thought. Not tonight.

"Hey!" I yelled.

A human made shadow by fog. I saw him startle and stop. We stood there in the grey soup, looking at each other.

"Hey!" I yelled again, the soup swallowing up my voice so it sounded flat and weird. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"What the hell am I doing? What the hell are you doing?"

"Me?" What a jerk. "I'm jumpin', man. What does it look like I'm doin'?"

"Nuh-uh!" The guy's voice was shrill. He sounded angry, or scared. "I'm jumpin'!"

"No way! Today's my day!"

We were both on the wrong side of the fence. Or the right side, depending on how you looked at it. I wasn't worried about cops finding out I didn't have a permit. By the time they figured it out, I'd be dead. Just had to get rid of this jerk.

The sound of traffic going by right behind us was deafening. The wind was fierce up here.

I had my journal with me. I was gonna leave it up there so they would find it. As I walked toward the jerk, I flipped in the pages of my journal. Then I held it up in front of me, two inches from his stupid face.

"There," I said. "What does that say?"

The guy was young and skinny. He was wearing jeans and a black T-shirt and a black pea-coat and a pair of retro black-and-

white checkered Vans. His hair was dyed black and cut so that it made his face look extra stupid. He pushed his black-framed glasses up on his nose and gave me a sullen look before he focused on the page in front of his face. He read out loud in a dull monotone: "I'm gonna do it on her birthday. October eleventh. I want them to know why I did it. I want them to—"

I snapped the journal closed, almost catching his sharp little nose in it. He flinched.

"See?" I said. "Today's my day."

I turned around and started walking back to the spot. I looked down and saw the wake of some yuppie's expensive sailboat.

"I'm doin' it anyway," he said.

I wheeled around. "You are not!" I said. "That is not fair! Today is my day! I showed you the journal!"

"Just because I don't have a journal doesn't mean I shouldn't get to do it. You don't understand, man. I'm ready."

"Well, so am I."

"Well, so am I."

We stood there. I wasn't gonna jump if this little weasel was gonna jump. This was my day.

What to do? Beat him unconscious?

Then the thought occurred to me: pay him off. I had five thousand and sixty-two dollars in the bank I didn't need. Barely enough for a month's rent on my crappy apartment, but maybe.

I opened my mouth to offer him the money when I heard someone shouting from across the bridge.

"Heeeey!" someone was shouting.

The weasel and I both looked over. We couldn't see anything. It was too foggy.

"Is it the cops?" asked the weasel.

I snorted. "Yeah," I said. "The cops are gonna stand over there and yell."

"I don't have a permit," he said.

I ignored him.

We saw the guy emerge out of the fog like a ghost: a quick ghost. He was running to beat the traffic. I kept expecting to hear the screech of brakes, the thud as somebody barreled into him. The cars really zinged by up here.

He was out of breath when he reached us. He leaned over on his knees: a fat black guy in his 40s, maybe 50s. A yuppie in a suit. The top of his hair had grayed in a weird circle. The weasel and I looked at each other.

"What the hell are you doing here?" I asked him.

"Heard you guys—" he said. He was out of breath. He held up one finger, straightened up. "Heard you guys arguing." His lips puffed in and out.

"So?" said Weasel.

"Can't do it—" said the fat black guy.

"What?" I yelled. We had to yell to be heard over the traffic and the wind. Also I was pissed.

He still hadn't gotten his breath back.

"My night," he puffed.

I couldn't believe it.

"Are you sayin' what I think you're sayin'?"

"October eleventh," he said, arming sweat off his face. "Day my little boy died last year."

I couldn't believe it. "Well, boo-hoo," I said. "I was here first."

"No, man," said Fatty, still panting. "Been here for hours."

"Dammit!" I said. I started to pace. What was I gonna do now? Pay 'em both off?

"Look," I said, "I'll give you each two thousand dollars if you wait till tomorrow."

Weasel snorted. Fatty laughed.

"Are you kidding?" he said. Now that he had wind his voice was loud and booming in the fog.

"No, I'm not kidding," I said. I lit a cigarette. I smoke a lot when I'm nervous. "What's one more day? You'll still die tomorrow, and

you can give your wife or whoever two thousand bucks to get drunk on after your funeral."

"My wife's dead," said Fatty.

"Or whoever," I said.

"I'm not married," said Weasel.

"Or whoever!" I yelled at him. I pulled out my iPhone. "I'll transfer it right now."

"We don't want your money," said Fatty.

Dammit. I should have known this was gonna happen. Last year 1,066 people jumped off the Golden Gate Bridge. I mean, it had been ramping up for decades, but the Overpopulation Act of 2054 opened the floodgates. Suicides' families were given tax exemptions and entered into exclusive drawings. Mary Chase's mom had won an iCar, but she still hadn't learned how to fly it.

You could also get abortions free on demand. That got you into the drawings, too.

The city of San Francisco had gates installed in the fences blocking tourists from the rust-red structure of the Golden Gate Bridge. Now all you had to do was step right through. It was encouraged. But you were supposed to take certain steps, get your permit, etcetera. The city was making a lot of money off suicides.

But if I was gonna do it, I didn't wanna do it with a bunch of other jerks. One thousand sixty-six a year averaged to around three a day, but the holidays ate up a lot of those. Around Christmastime, the Exit Ports were crowded. Tourists would stand back and take pictures of people jumping. If you got a really good one, it might get on ExitPorn.com.

I wanted to be the only one tonight. And apparently, so did Weasel and Fatty. It made me angry. I wanted to yell at them for being selfish. I wanted to tell them what we're all supposed to know: that death is profound or whatever, but individual deaths are not that big of a deal and we should just get it over with so there will be more resources for everyone else.

But I couldn't yell at them without yelling at myself.

"All right," I said. "We'll flip for it."

Weasel and Fatty looked at each other. Weasel shrugged.

"All right," said Fatty. "It's the only fair way, I guess."

I took a coin out of my pocket. I had put a lot of 'em in there to make sure I sank fast. It was against the rules because it was extra work for the Exit Crew, but that's what I wanted. Extra time. Spent on me. My death.

"We'll do best three outta five," I said.

A few seconds later Fatty was cursing and stamping, and Weasel was shaking his head.

"Hey, you agreed to it," I said. "See you gentlemen on the other side."

Weasel made a scoffing sound. "Other side," he said, sneering.

I opened the gate and headed back to my spot. I pulled the card from my pocket. It was sapphire blue and had nothing on it but a numeral 6 in raised silver on the bottom right-hand corner. I took a deep breath and swiped it through the card reader. The little light immediately glowed green and I went through the gate.

So the rumors on the ExiTalk forums were true: you could re-use a card.

I had found this one in Mary's wallet, in her little turquoise canvas purse that was still hanging across her body when they dragged her grey corpse from the frigid water. The strap had been tangled in her hair. I knew because when I saw the purse, lying on her dresser in her bedroom, I could see the long, gleaming blonde strands twisted around the strap.

I didn't ask her mom if I could have the card. I just took it. And a strand of her hair. It was in a tiny ziploc bag, the kind drug dealers use, in the right front pocket of my jeans.

I was clutching it as I climbed the steps to the Exit Post. All of me was cold but my hands, which sweated.

There were thirteen of them. Not my hands—the Exit Posts. One every hundred meters of the main span. I looked down at the

water. One lonely boat sailed past underneath me, headed for the ocean. I could see the soft light from an iFilm coming out of the cabin. It looked warm in there and my teeth were chattering. To my right and far below tourists snapped pics and holos from the banks. I could actually hear the buzz and whir of their holocams. A little kid was laughing. What was he doing out so late?

It was so cold. The wind. I tried to focus all my attention on the palms of my hands, shoved in my pockets and so hot they felt like they glowed.

I turned and looked down. Weasel and Fatty were standing there looking up at me.

“What the hell are you lookin’ at?” I said.

They said nothing. Their faces were blank. I turned back to the water. I couldn’t imagine how cold it would be. I had thought of it, but I couldn’t imagine it. Would I feel it, I wondered, the shock of the icy water punishing my skin, filling my lungs?

I remembered what Mary Chase had told me right before she did it. She was looking at her hair in the mirror. “Once you breathe in, it’s peaceful.” She had been to one of the seminars. “If you breathe in right away, it feels like nothing at all, just going to sleep. But if you fight it and try to hold on, that’s what makes it hard. Just—” She took a deep breath, with a peaceful look on her face, and let it out. “—breathe,” she said. She smiled at me.

She went the next day, at this very Exit Post. Number six.

She wasn’t dumb. She wasn’t lost. She was brilliant. And not beautiful, but incredible to look at. The light in her eyes? It was tremendous. She was going to be a scientist. Instead she decided dying was the only moral thing to do in these times. So she went ahead and died.

I admired her conviction, but I didn’t have it. I was just sad. Too sad to live.

To my left there was a glossy flat black screen. I touched it and it lit up. I could see greasy fingerprints all over it. I could feel

Weasel and Fatty down there, watching, but I was going to take my time. This was my night.

The screen glowed sapphire blue. Then a 2D image of the bridge during the day, bright and beautiful, cars streaming across and above it. Glorious music played, a Celtic harp or something.

"Thank you for choosing the Golden Gate Bridge as the point from which you'll exit this life. You have chosen Exit Post number" —a very slight pause—"Six." The voice was warm, female, soothing. As it spoke about the dignity of ending one's own life, images of human beings faded in and then out again, with dates at the bottoms. One date per person.

Herbert Voorhies, June 11, 2060. Celeste Williams, April 17, 2059.

Then her face came up. I stopped breathing. She was wearing a mortarboard and smiling. The picture from when she graduated from Berkeley. The words said: Mary Chase, January 30, 2061.

"October eleventh," I said out loud to no one. "October eleventh, 2037."

The wind was suddenly very cold on my face, and I tasted snot.

"What about the day she was born?" I asked the water.

Now the woman's voice was inviting me to choose a prayer if I was so inclined. I reached out with my left hand, without thinking, and punched the screen. "You have chosen a Buddhist chant," murmured the voice. "Thank you."

Anonymous voices started to drone in Pali like a million baritone wasps.

I rubbed my sore knuckles and looked at the water. It looked far away, and dark.

"Could we speed this up?" yelled a voice. It was a cop. He was standing down there with Weasel and Fatty. I hadn't even heard him come up. His iCycle whirred in a little pool of purple light.

"Got a permit?" the cop yelled.

I turned back to the water. "No!" I yelled.

I heard a click and whirr as the cop activated his iStik. "Come

on down from there!" he yelled. "Can't jump without a permit."

I sneered back over my shoulder at him. "What are you gonna do, kill me?" I asked.

I saw his face. The fog was soup-thick, but I swear I saw his face, and that's what made me do it. Because what I saw in his face was this: he didn't give a damn if I did it or not.

Why was this a revelation? It wasn't. Nobody cared if anybody did it, unless it was somebody they knew. It meant more food, more room, more everything for everybody. When somebody jumped, you might shake your head, but then you said what you'd heard everywhere from everyone: "If we get below nine billion, they can start letting people off Europa."

Standing up there, tasting the salt, hearing the cop climb the ladder behind me, I didn't care if those people rotted on Europa. I thought back over the past several months and I couldn't remember making the decision to jump. After a while, if you mention it to people, if you're sad for long enough, it becomes a foregone conclusion. My mother cried the first few times I brought it up, but she'd been treating me like I was already dead for months. When I called her the day before, she had sounded surprised, even disappointed.

"Peter, is that you?" she said. "I thought you jumped."

"Tomorrow," I said. "Mary's birthday."

"Awww," she said, pulling a face. "That's very thoughtful of you, Pete. I'm sure Mr. and Mrs. Chase will appreciate the gesture." Behind her I could see Dad watching an old 2D that had been converted to holo.

"What's Dad watching?" I asked.

"Some old thing," said Mom, squinching her nose. She had the typical bourgeois hatred of anything old, including Dad. "It's called *The Virgin Suicides*. Have you heard of it?"

"No," I said. If she had made any connection between the movie and what I was about to do, she didn't let on.

"What's it about?" I asked her. I knew because I read the book, but I had nothing to say. And since it was our last conversation, I figured I ought to say something.

"I don't know, Pete. Virgins committing suicide, I imagine," she said. She rubbed her elbows and looked vaguely embarrassed.

"Mary was a virgin," I said, for no reason.

She looked at me blankly.

"What, honey?"

"Nothing," I said. I took a deep breath and felt something plugging my throat and stinging the backs of my eyes. "I guess this is goodbye."

Mom smiled at me warmly. "Goodbye, darling," she said. "We'll look for you on ExiTalk. All the girls at work—"

But I had signed off. I couldn't look at her anymore.

Now the damned cop was climbing the ladder behind me and I had that same feeling in my throat. I couldn't swallow it. The cop was standing behind me on the platform. I could feel the faint hum of the iStik.

"Just clobber me and kick me off," I said, looking at the water.

"Doesn't work that way, buddy," he said. "Turn around."

I turned around.

I turned around, I saw that look on his face.

I turned around, I saw that look on his face that said this: I don't care. You don't matter. Jump. Jump, stranger. Who are you to me? If we get below nine billion they'll start letting people off Europa.

So I jumped.

I jumped backwards, pushing off with my legs as hard as I could. I felt the muscles flex in my thighs. I heard the wind blow past my ears. I saw the cop's expressionless face get smaller and disappear behind the rust-red beam. It only takes four seconds to hit the water, but before I did, he had already turned away, bored.

When his face was gone, I closed my eyes and pictured it, the face that said I don't care. Jump. I don't care. Jump. If I held that face in my mind it was going to be easy. If I did what Mary said, if I

just breathed in, it would be a real breeze.

I squeezed my butt cheeks together. I didn't want water to shoot into me and puree my intestines. I didn't know if I'd feel it, or why I should care, but I did. I put my hands by my sides and pointed my toes and made myself a straight, hard arrow slicing into the water.

I felt myself go in. Later, I looked it up, and found out I hit going about 120 kilometers per hour. I remember thinking, it does hurt. It does hurt. It was the cold that hurt. It was like being enveloped in cut. As though all of your skin was a cut, all at once. I opened my eyes.

Breathe in, I said to myself. You're not dead yet. Breathe in. Breathe in. Breathe in the water and it will all be over.

I couldn't breathe in. I wanted to. Something wouldn't let me do it. It was survival instinct. They'd done all they could to train it out of us, but we still had it.

And it was something else, too. A voice. No, not a voice. More of a hum in my head, and a violet light behind my eyes, and Mary. Mary with that peaceful look on her face, telling me to breathe.

Then all the peacefulness left me in an instant. All the violet light and the hum—gone. Only rage was left. I wanted to open my mouth and scream at Mary with a sound louder than the trumpets of the angels in a heaven that didn't want me: NO! I wanted to scream it at her with all the energy I had ever used in my lifetime, gather it all back into me and roar NO at her with the nuclear rage of our raging, dying sun.

NO.

I thought NO. I was NO. I had never been anything but NO. It was the only thought I had. I had never had another thought or known another word.

I swam for the surface.

In the books they say, My lungs were screaming. I know what that means now. They say, My lungs were bursting. I know what

that means now.

Einstein said time is relative. I know what that means now.

I don't know how long it took me to reach the surface, but if I had to guess, I'd say about six hours.

My head broke the water and I made a horrible gasping sound when I breathed in air. I breathed for a few seconds and let the cold slash at me. To my left I could hear something: a few tourists out. They were clapping. I could hear the click and whir of their holocams.

NO.

I looked up at the glowing blue 6 that marked the Exit Post I had jumped from. It was the only thing visible through the fog. The bridge was gone in a thick grey soup. It may as well have not even been there at all. I imagined the cop up there, talking into his iPhone, summoning the Exit Patrol.

NO.

I decided since I was still alive I would go ahead and make for the shore before I got hypothermia and died anyway. I floated on my back mostly, and half-heartedly pushed myself along. I was tired. None of my body parts wanted to move. I didn't feel one way or the other about it. I just felt NO.

Some tourists helped fish me out of the water. They asked me if I was okay. One of them was whispering the word "miracle."

"No," I said. But that's all I said. I didn't feel like explaining.

The earth felt good, so good. I sat down on it and shook from the cold. When the Exit Patrol got there, they looked annoyed. Used to be, about five percent of Golden Gate jumpers lived. But now they had the seminars, where they taught you how to do it right.

But I didn't go to the seminar. I didn't get a permit.

I was placed under arrest by the bored cop. His eyes were deader than I'd ever be. I asked why he was arresting me. "Failure to obtain the proper licensure for the commission of suicide at the Golden Gate Bridge," he said in a tired voice. The paramedics on

the Exit Crew put me in the ambulance, took my sopping clothes, and wrapped me naked in some shiny metal stuff, to make sure I didn't die of hypothermia.

I asked them to take the sapphire blue card and the little drug dealer bag out of my pocket and give it to me, but they said no. Then the cop handcuffed me to the stretcher.

The dark spell had not left me. I still felt the roaring NO inside me. I was going to the hospital, then maybe to jail. I didn't care.

My mom would be disappointed. I didn't care.

I closed my eyes and thought of Mary. Had it been sweet for her? I hoped so. I hoped she had not been sliced at by the cold, had not felt her lungs screaming or bursting.

When I opened my eyes Weasel was in the ambulance with me. He handed me my journal.

"Thanks," I said. I tucked it against my wet body, under the shiny metal stuff. I thought about the entry I would make later. It would say: "NO."

"The other guy jumped," he said. "He had a permit."

I shrugged. "Guess it wasn't my night after all."

The medics made Weasel leave. My eyes were closing. I couldn't see it through my eyelids, through the ambulance, through the fog, but down below in the bay: a bright cluster of movement. They were pulling Fatty out of the water.

KRISTEN HATTEN is a blogger at Chronicles of Radness. She has been writing since she was six years old. She is now considerably older but still enjoys chocolate milk and cartoons.

... leave a message

Doug Mathewson

Hello . . . hey, it's me! I'm calling you from Heaven. Can you believe it? This is the last place I'd even imagine ending up! So I only get one phone call, like jail I guess, and wanted to say thanks and goodbye, at least for now. Everything happened so suddenly; there wasn't a chance till now to say how great you were to me.

Heaven's not like you might think. Nothing at all like those cartoons of people with wings wearing white robes and standing around on clouds. Maybe it was like that once, but not now. I'll have to ask some of the old-timers once I learn my way around. Heaven, or at least Heaven now, is completely individualized. You stay endlessly in whatever was the happiest part of your life. That's what it seems like so far.

Up here I am nine years old and spend my time sitting or lying under different folding tables. They are in a store that my older sister, Tina, worked at part time after school. It was a piñata store with hundreds of piñatas displayed hanging from the ceiling. Underneath were all these long tables piled high with party supplies, including lots of Mexican candy to fill piñatas. There were so many strange sugary treats. Some with pictures of beautiful ladies with fans dancing, and other ones with funny wrestlers wearing masks! Candy with Jesus or with Saints I didn't really understand on the wrappers, but all the candy was pure sugar (especially my favorites, the decorated sugar skulls). Candy that makes your teeth hurt and your head spin.

Our mom had told Tina she had to keep an eye on me after school, so she took me with her to work. I'd read comics I had brought from home, or borrowed, and eat as much candy as possible. I really loved being there. Hot afternoons, lying on the

concrete floor in the shade of a table with tales of superhero adventure to sweep my racing heart and brain along.

There weren't many customers during the week back then, and none at all now. Tina's not here either, so I don't know if she has her own special time and place in Heaven or has gone to Hell like Sister Maria Dolores said she would.

So far I haven't seen anybody we know, which, all things considered, probably makes sense. I shouldn't form an opinion yet, as most people our age are still young and healthy. I do wonder about older relatives, old people who were neighbors, family friends, the postman or anybody. I can't really picture them damned for eternity, so they must be in their own Heaven.

I hope it will be a very long time before you get here, and somehow I know that you will, but when you do, look for me. "Tio Bo-Bo's" store in an old strip mall on RT-66, three blocks west of "Old Town" in Albuquerque, New Mexico. I have freckles and a buzz-cut. You'll know me. I'm the kid vibrating at a frequency only dogs can hear, a Jarittos fruit punch in one shaky hand an old copy of "The Caped Avenger" in the other.

DOUG MATHEWSON writes short fiction. "It's like magic," he says (meaning sometimes the trick works, and sometimes not). He has been published here and there, now and then by very kind and forgiving people. He is the publisher and editor of *Blink-Ink*, the finest and fiercest of 50-word fiction. Also he is a section editor for Pandemonium Press in Berkeley, California. His current project, working title "The Mambo Academy of Kitty Wang," is a secret, so no further information is available at this time. While he is a bumpkin at heart, he admires others for their urban grit.

Hurrah Boy

Madeline Weinland

Carson tipped the coffee cup against his lips and took a long sip as he passed the protesters outside of the hospital. He was still unshaven, and his t-shirt was covered in wrinkles. He stopped next to a group of kneeling Catholics and looked over their heads to inspect himself in the hospital window's reflection.

I look like shit, he thought, as he ran his hand through his hair. It was getting long and floppy, like when he was a kid. One of the Catholics looked up at him, holding his rosary in the air between them.

"Sorry, man, just passing through. Carry on," Carson said, and made the sign of the cross. He took one last look at himself in the reflection and sighed.

When he got back to the hotel lobby, he nodded to Pete, the concierge. Before he met Pete, Carson had worked at The Meridian in Beachwood, which was about forty-five minutes from Cleveland. He had one, maybe two clients a month in Beachwood. Then he met Pete at a funeral; they went out for a few beers at the Winking Lizard, got talking, and struck up a deal. Pete got fifteen percent of the tips and payment, and Carson got a room at Driftwood and his post in the lobby.

Driftwood was perfect. The lobby doors were directly across the street from the hospital in downtown Cleveland. Turn right out of the lobby and the road turns into Restaurant Row, where there was every type of food, from Burrito King to Flannery's Steak and Seafood. Turn left and it becomes Extreme Alley, where patients could sign up for any extreme sport they could dream of. Patients loved staying at the Driftwood, and Carson loved the patients.

It was Monday, and the weekend had been busy. He had accompanied an elderly lady named Martha to three musicals and an opera, and taken her ballroom dancing. He had stayed up until four in the morning listening to her prattle on about her life. She had been a ballerina, she had met her husband in the war, so on and so forth. Their last nights were usually like this. Exhausting.

He had walked her to her final appointment, kissed her on the cheek, and left to get his morning coffee. Back at his post in the lobby, he watched a few people check in from his armchair near the fake fireplace. He heard Pete go through his normal speech, telling them where the restaurants were, recommending they get to appointments early, pointing out where to drop off any clothing donations, and showing them the post office located at the far end of the lobby, should they want to ship anything home.

The first five or six people said they just wanted to be alone. Around noon, Carson was halfway through a submarine sandwich when a young woman came in. She was about thirty-five or forty and was wearing a black floor-length evening gown. She carried a small duffel bag, and her hair was piled in a towering updo. When Pete mentioned that he could arrange some company, should she want any, he heard the woman say, "That would be lovely."

Pete gestured over to where Carson sat, and Carson tipped his sandwich in greeting towards the woman. She turned to look at him, and he saw her face pull back into a wide grin. She had big wide cheeks and even bigger eyes. Everything about her face was big, but it all fit together somehow into some kind of oversized symmetry. She had a small frame, but it was hard to see what her body looked like beneath her draping evening gown.

He got up and went over to the desk, extending his hand towards the woman.

"Carson Peterson," he said, putting on his best smile. He was still holding his sandwich in his left hand; he wondered if he'd have time to finish it later.

"Is that your real name?" The woman answered, shaking his hand. "That sounds like a stage name. Miranda Waters. And no, that is not my real name."

Carson held his smile, trying to size her up.

"Yes, that's my real name. Maybe my mother wanted me to be an actor."

"You seem like a good actor to me," she replied. Her smile was still stretched across her wide face, so Carson couldn't tell if she was joking. "I'm going to call you Craig. I always wanted to know a man named Craig."

"Sure, nice to meet you Miranda, I'm Craig." Carson said.

He took her bag to her room, and she didn't attempt any small talk. Her ball gown swished along the floor, and she tripped on it several times. She'd straighten up and keep walking as if nothing had happened.

"I have a schedule for my stay all set," she said, placing her bag at the end of the bed. "I printed an extra copy, just in case the rumors of the Hurrahs were true. And sure enough, there you are."

She continued, unzipping her bag and pulling out tiny neat piles of shirts and dresses and a giant floral toiletry bag, laying them on the bed.

"I'm exhausted. I flew in from Florida and didn't sleep at all. I'm going to take a nap. Consult the itinerary and meet me at dinner when you've . . . cleaned up a bit."

"You don't like my shirt?" he asked, pulling it out in front of him.

"Well, you could stand a shower and shave. I honestly could care less what you wear. I will see you at eight."

Carson shaved after a hot shower, splashing his face with his spiced aftershave. He didn't know what to make of this woman. So far, she hadn't fit the profile of most patients. First, there was the ball gown. Then again, he'd seen some patients arrive in some

strange outfits. But none so formal, as if this was a time to celebrate. Most wore sweatpants or plain jeans, not wasting any time on external appearance. Then there was the whole name thing. He'd never been named like that before. Usually, women found his name very sexy. Or so he'd been told. And telling him to shower was new as well. His "women like scruffy" theory was out the window. Lonely patients were usually so desperate for company that they never paid attention to what he looked like.

He decided to impress her by being early, so he left with enough time to reach the restaurant, A.C. Steakhouse, with ten minutes to spare. He was wearing his favorite slim-fitting blazer and a skinny black tie. He'd had the suit tailored with the profits from his first client. A few women whistled at him as he walked by, and he winked back at them with a smile.

He was disappointed when he saw her already waiting for him at the restaurant, but had to hold in a laugh when he saw what she was wearing. She had changed out of her black evening gown and had on what looked like a bright red ice-skating uniform. It had sequins along the top and a skirt made of fluffy pink feathers. He kissed her hand and she grinned. Her hair was wrapped in thick braids around her head.

"Before you ask, this was my grandmother's competitive skating outfit. I promised her I'd be a skater and wear her outfits when she was on her deathbed. Well, I figured I'd hold up at least half of that promise. And who the fuck cares what I look like anyways. Soon enough it won't matter."

"I think you look beautiful."

"Yeah, yeah, I look ridiculous. And these braids make me look like Heidi. But there's a first, and a last, time for everything. First time I look like a flamingo at a steakhouse, that's for sure. These sequins itch like hell."

She turned and waved to the waiter who was waiting to take her to her table. They followed him to a small section near a fireplace. The fire burned year round, despite the thick July heat.

"I've been wondering this since I landed," she began. "Why'd they pick Cleveland for this whole operation?" She hunched forward in her chair, leaning on her elbows. Her whole body was turned to him. He sat up straight, conscious of how closely she was watching him.

"Well, it makes sense if you think about it. They needed a place with a shitty economy and good doctors. Cleveland has been constantly trying to rebuild after their steel glory days, and the Clinic supplied the doctors. So now the city makes most of its money from the tourist industry, so to speak."

"Tourists. Very funny," she said, laughing. "So how did you get into your line of work?"

"I had just graduated from college when the law passed, so I came here looking for a job. After talking to a lot of patients I noticed that there was a constant need for companionship. So I decided to fill that need. I didn't make much at first, but when I made it to the Driftwood, business picked up."

"Isn't it strange, though? You're a companion for the nearly deceased."

"I suppose so. But I don't think of it that way. I think of it as being a companion to help people finish living."

The waiter came and took their orders. Miranda ordered the surf and turf, the most expensive item on the menu, and Carson ordered the prime rib. He liked to order a mid-menu item the first night, to feel out how the bill would be paid. His pay was good, but not that good.

"You're good with words," she said as she plucked at a dinner roll. "You put them together well. Do you get that a lot?"

"No, not really. I'll be honest though, I don't usually do much talking with my clients."

"Clients!" she shrieked, louder than she meant to. She covered her mouth and mouthed 'sorry' to the tables around her. "Is that what we are? Clients?"

"Well, what else would you be?"

"I don't know. Johns? Sugar mamas?" She was using her teasing voice again, but her face was serious. He couldn't tell if she was joking.

"You know I'm not a prostitute, right?" he asked.

"Well, no, technically you're not. But you do exist off of the companionship of the lonely or alone. So maybe an escort?"

"A companion. You know, there are Hurrah Girls too. They have an even harder time convincing people they're not hookers. We are companions," he said.

"Whatever you say, Craig. So what do you mean you don't usually do much talking with clients?"

"Well, most people who come to Cleveland as a patient and use my services want to talk. They want to tell me about themselves and their family and their lives. One of my biggest jobs is to listen." She was leaning towards him again. She was listening so intensely that it made him a little nervous. He had a sudden flash of fear that she was a cop. He went on. "They don't usually ask me this many questions."

"Oh, don't mind me, I've always just found people interesting. And you Hurrah Boys, well, you're interesting. Even your name is interesting. Doesn't it make you sad to be called something about death?"

"For the record, I don't call myself that, only patients call me that," he said, laughing. "I mean, if you think about it, we're named after being happy before something ends. 'The last hurrah' implies some last burst of joy before the nothingness."

"Last burst of joy before the nothingness," Miranda repeated. She rolled the words around on her tongue, and she repeated it

several times. "That sounds fancy and all, but I think it's bullshit. But lovely bullshit. You spit lovely bullshit, Craig."

"Thank you, Miranda." He raised his glass to toast to her. "To your life," he said.

"And to yours," she said, and they touched glasses before emptying them. She paid the bill.

The next morning, Miranda had gotten a coveted 8:00 a.m. appointment. Carson knew that this one was the hardest. He waited for her outside on a bench near the hospital door. This time, he was wearing a crisp button-up with jeans and a gray blazer. He sipped from his coffee and listened to the chants of the protesters. They were lining the street in front of him, waving their giant poster-board signs and shaking their fists.

The chants had changed themes over the years. When he first began, there were chants to change the law, saying that it was unconstitutional. Then they became purely religious, as the lobbyists gave up and the pious took over. Recently, there was a strange mix of all types of protest. Religion, law, and social justice blended together, shouted by an array of clergy, families, confused high schoolers, and impassioned loners. Some protesters just stood with their signs and watched. Carson thought sometimes they just needed to see the patients going in to know it was real.

The chanting of "Don't play God" had just started behind him when she came out of the door. He jumped to his feet and grabbed her elbow. She was stumbling a little, so he tossed his coffee cup aside and put his arm around her back to support her. A protestor called out to him to pick up his litter, and he yelled a few choice words back. He pushed her through the crowd to the other side of the street, where the hotel doors slid open for them. The whole time he whispered, "Don't listen to them, don't listen to them, you know what you want. It's your choice."

When he got her to her hotel room, he sat her on the bed, and he took a seat in the striped armchair across the room. He watched her. She just looked sad and weak. In this, she was just like the other patients. The “full disclosure” appointment left them all rattled.

She was wearing a dress with a tulle skirt, her hair in a high bun. She ran her hands along the creases of her skirt for a few minutes, until she stood up and went to the bathroom. He heard the water running, and then there was about ten minutes of silence. He knocked on the door.

“Miranda?” He said softly. “Are you all right?”

When she opened the door, he saw that she had changed into a man’s football jersey and had painted black stripes under her eyes.

“This was my dad’s jersey, he played football in college.”

“Was he any good?”

“He was great. His high school team won their state championship. He was recruited to Nebraska and he led them to two national titles. He was great,” she said. Her voice was quieter than it had been the night before.

“Do you want to talk about your appointment? I know that this one’s the hardest, if that’s any consolation.”

“What were you saying to me as we left? Don’t listen? It’s my choice? Something like that, right?”

He shrugged. “I’ll be honest, I just like to talk when you guys come out of that appointment to block out what those knuckleheads are saying out there. They’re idiots.”

“Do you know what they do at this appointment?”

“I’ve heard a few things,” he said cautiously. He didn’t want to push her.

“I know they want us to think about it from all sides. They want us to know what we’re doing before we do it, and make us wait the twenty-four hours afterwards to make our final decision. I get it. But they make us watch someone die. And then they make us

watch the Tellers call his family to say he was dead. They make you watch him get cremated, and then they make you watch his family's funeral for him. They make you watch the family crying. It went on for hours. It was awful."

"I know, it must be difficult right now, after you've made this decision."

She sighed. "That's not it. You don't understand. I have no family to tell. When I die, no one will know. No one will need to be told. My parents were only children, and I'm their only child. I don't really have any friends, since I moved with my husband so much."

"Is that why you're doing this? Because you're alone?"

"It's more than that."

Carson let the silence sit in the room with them. After some time, she got up and put her purse over her shoulder.

"Well, time for some extreme sports," she said.

"You can wait a bit if you want. We don't have to go out right away, you had a hard morning," he told her, standing up as well.

"If they think I'm changing my mind after coming all the way up here, they're nuts."

"I think that was part of their plan by choosing Cleveland. Only the truly desperate would choose to come to Cleveland at all," he said, and she gave him a weak smile.

"So, sky diving or bungee jumping, which is better?"

"Both are pretty fun. You feel like you're flying. My absolute favorite is the hot air balloon, though. It's slower and you can enjoy it longer," he said, holding the door open for her.

"As you say, Craig. You're the expert at dying, here. Or finishing living," With that, she was out the door, and Carson was walking after her.

The wind whipped through Miranda's hair and Carson could smell her shampoo. Her eyes were closed, and she had her arms

outstretched like a bird. The man directing the balloon looked bored, but Carson couldn't keep his eyes off of Miranda. Every ounce of her looked happy.

"It's amazing, right?" he asked her.

"It's like nothing I've ever done before. You were right. I want to enjoy this feeling of the real air around me for as long as I can." Her voice was breathy and high. After a few minutes, she looked back at Carson.

"Craig, do you think I'll come back to Earth as a bird?" He tried to read her face again. She looked serious, almost pleading.

"I think you could. You look like you were made for the sky," he told her. She smiled, and her cheeks looked round and wide, like the day before when he first met her.

"I think you're right," she said, and she turned back to face the wind. Carson watched the shoreline recede as they flew over the lake. There were several other balloons in the sky, taking their patients for one last ride. It was a beautiful sunny day, much less hot than the day before. He let the sun warm his face and he turned to watch the living woman enjoy her last day on Earth.

The day was going quickly. Carson wondered if she could feel the passing time as acutely as he could. He wondered what that would feel like, knowing each second was a countdown to the end. Knowing the number of seconds left.

They had agreed to meet in the lobby for dinner, so he made small talk with Pete while he waited. Pete was telling him about the increase in summer hotel guests when she tapped him on the shoulder. He turned around and saw her standing there in a tight black cocktail dress and red heels.

"Wow," he said. "You look great."

"Thanks, I wanted to look good on my last night out. My feet are killing me." Her cheeks were rosy, and she was glowing. He offered her his arm, and escorted her out of the front door.

"Where to, miss?" he said. She hadn't told him where they would be going for dinner. She said she wanted it to be a surprise.

"I'll show you when we get there." She was clutching onto him hard, wobbling a little with each step.

"I'm guessing you don't wear heels often?"

"You guessed correctly, sir. I was a nurse for years and wore tennis shoes every day. But damn, heels make my legs look good. My husband used to tell me that on the very rare occasions I pulled these out."

"He was right," Carson said, squeezing her hand where it rested on his arm.

They turned a corner, and another, and another, until they were back on Restaurant Row, but walking the opposite direction. He realized she was trying to confuse him.

"You do know I know this town better than you do, right? It will be hard to deceive me."

"I can try, can't I?" she said. They headed down the stretch of fast-food restaurants. When they reached BurgerMania, she stopped and turned to him.

"I know this is supposed to be a ceremonial last meal, but I love fast food more than anything. I stopped eating it because I was worried about my cholesterol after Ted's heart attack. But I have nothing to lose now."

"It sounds perfect," he told her, and opened the door so she could enter the restaurant. Miranda ordered a large fry and double cheeseburger with a chocolate milkshake. Carson got the same.

They sat near the window, and Miranda ate the food so quickly she choked a couple of times.

"Slow down, it's not time yet," he joked, and to his relief, she laughed.

"This is my last meal. I'll eat it how I want to."

"Can I ask you something?"

"Sure," she said, cramming another bit of burger into her mouth.

"You are someone who appreciates things. You like the way I use my words. You love fast food. And I've never seen someone enjoy the feeling of wind more than when I saw you in the balloon today. I'm not trying to convince you not to go through with it. I just want to know why someone who loves things so much would want to leave them."

She put the last of her burger in her mouth and chewed for a moment. She took a long pull of her milkshake before answering.

"I do like *things*. But I *love* people. I loved people, I should say. This hamburger is fleeting. See, it's already gone. The people I loved are fleeting. They're gone too. I will never love anyone the way I loved Ted. I know that so deeply that it physically weighs me down. I will never see my parents' faces at their front door as I pull into the driveway to visit them. I will never have these people again, and people are all we have. They're all I had. I have plenty I *could* live for, if I chose to. But I have had enough love in my life to feel satisfied. I have had enough good so that I know that there *is* good. Isn't that enough? What more could I want?"

She popped a French fry in her mouth and looked out the window.

She's just the same, he thought.

Carson walked her home, thinking about what she had said the whole time. He went back to his own room and went to bed alone.

He woke up the next morning, put on his last pressed shirt and a pair of khakis. He shaved his face, but the stubble was too short, so he got a little razor burn under his chin. He splashed the aftershave on again and ran a comb through his hair.

He wanted to look nice for her on her last day. He realized he hadn't asked her how she was going to do it. They usually told him after the disclosure appointment. He didn't want to know.

She was waiting for him in the lobby, wearing jeans and a white tank top. She wore no makeup, and her hair hung past her shoulders.

"I dropped off my clothes, sent my jewelry to a couple of girls that lived on my street, and had some coffee. Oh, and I paid the disposal fee, coroner, and hospital fee. Did I forget anything?"

"I don't think so," Carson told her. "Do you feel ready?"

"I think so," she said.

He led her through the front door and put his arm around her to guide her through the protestors. They were yelling, "Choose to live."

When they got to the front entrance, they turned to look at each other.

"Well, it's been great knowing you," she said. "You've been a wonderful companion. I've put some money in your name at the front desk. Thanks for accompanying me while I finished living."

"You're welcome. I hope your end is the start of something great for you."

She held out her hand.

"I'm Nancy. It's nice to meet you, Carson."

He shook her hand and she smiled with her cheeks pulled wide. He kissed her on the cheek, and she walked into the building.

He watched her go, and then made his way back through the protesters on his way to get coffee.

MADELINE WEINLAND got her MA in English from Arcadia University and is now getting her MFA from Arcadia as well. She is originally from Cleveland, Ohio, and often sets her fiction in the Midwest. When she's not writing, she works in the psychology department at The College of New Jersey. Her fiction has appeared in *The Rampallian*, *Scholars and Rogues*, and most recently, *Whisperings Magazine*.

On the cover:

“ROBOT 5: RUPERT”

Kris G. Brownlee

Canadian painter **KRIS G. BROWNLEE** populates her paintings with animals, robots and little girls, often evoking a vintage storybook feel. A touch of melancholy is pervasive in all of her characters, which the artist attributes to her childhood shyness. It's as if the characters she creates now are portraits of her imaginary friends, sprung to life on canvas.

Kris studied painting at Emily Carr University located on Granville Island, a perfect spot for people watching right along the sea wall of Vancouver, BC. You can often find the artist walking her pug and dreaming up new paintings inspired by the natural beauty of the city and the people who call it home. Her work is available at <http://www.aCageyBee.com> and <http://acageybee.etsy.com>.

